

THE FRONT DOOR KEY

Eleanor Kent owns a painting by Tintoretto which is valued at not less than a hundred thousand pounds. It is a bequest from her husband and she keeps it in her Kensington flat with only dithering Willie Savoy, an art historian, to act as occasional curator. Should she sell or not? Her daughter urges her to abide by her husband's dying wish, but Willie longs for the publicity of a great sale at Sotheby's or Christie's. The problem is made no easier when James Hogan, a strong-minded journalist, begins to take an interest in the picture – and in Eleanor.

BOOKS BY
JOHN BROPHY

NOVELS

Waterfront
Immortal Sergeant
Spearhead
Turn the Key Softly
The Day They Robbed the Bank of England
The Nimble Rabbit
The Prince and Petronella
Portrait of an Unknown Lady
Soldier of the Queen
Gentleman of Stratford
Sarah

NON-FICTION

The Human Face
Body and Soul
The Mind's Eye

THE FRONT DOOR KEY

BY JOHN BROPHY



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CHAPTER ONE

Homecoming

On that Tuesday evening, Eleanor Kent left her office in the City of London rather earlier than usual and, boarding an Inner Circle train at Cannon Street, got home to her flat in South Kensington before six o'clock. The flat was empty, as she knew it would be, for Tuesday was her housekeeper's weekly holiday and her daughter would be attending an evening lecture which she had described as 'rather special'.

After a busy day Mrs Kent ought to have been tired: perhaps she was in fact tired but she did not feel it. She felt, as she often did in the evening, physically restless. No sooner had she taken off her top coat than she put it on again. The hollow, not quite silent emptiness of the flat displeased her and she became aware of an urgent desire to be out of it again. In Gloucester Road and the Old Brompton Road there would be shops still open. All her domestic shopping could be, and was, done by her housekeeper: in spite of this, she was seized by a longing to go out and buy something.

The decision was taken not so much by her as for her. There was no one who possibly could call her to account for the fact that no sooner had she arrived home than she went – she was already on her way through the hall – out

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again, yet she needed to justify her action. She needed, goodness only knew why, an excuse. It came into her mind just as she was approaching the front door. The excuse was that she was under an obligation to buy a canteloup melon, not for herself – the taste of any kind of melon was not positive enough for her liking – but for Barbara, her daughter, her only child.

An excuse manufactured in advance provides a purpose, and Eleanor Kent's mood changed to a brisk happiness as she drew back the front door, stepped through the doorway, and then pulled the door, by its brass handle, behind her until the tongue of the upper lock snapped into place. Every day, and often several times in a day, she performed this operation, and so far as she could tell she never looked behind her: the small click and the settling of the door against the pull of her arm signalled the fact that it had become locked. This time, however, she turned her head as she pulled on the handle and looked back at the door. What she saw startled her. Fixed in the upper lock was a key. It must be her own key, for she recognised the others, strung on a ring with an address tab, hanging below the keyhole in a bunch.

What had happened was clear enough. Stepping out of the lift at the third floor, she had inserted the key, turned it sufficiently to move the wards of the lock, given a tiny push to free the door—and forgotten to remove the key!

She felt not only shocked but ashamed. She had done something careless, stupid and dangerous. The porters could not always be watching the front door of the flats. Every now and again some petty pilfering occurred – and she had left the key in her front door, as if to tempt anyone

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passing by! Small wonder that she felt guilty, confused and humiliated. Even while she stood there, dumbfounded, someone might come down the stairs or out of one of the other flats on the same landing and see the shameful thing!

Her hand went out and clutched the key, tugging it away from the little vertical hole. It emerged smoothly but the other keys jingled until she closed her hand over them, concealing the whole bunch from sight and silencing them also. She felt a sudden, almost debilitating relief, and it puzzled her that a minor mishap, quickly put right, should exert such a powerful effect on her emotions.

She put the question to herself, calling on a knowledge of psychology which she knew to be not merely incomplete but probably out of date. Nevertheless, she found an answer almost at once: while her conscious mind had genuinely forgotten to remove the key from the door, her unconscious had remembered and worried about it and nagged her into leaving the flat again almost as soon as she entered it. It was her unconscious, vigilant in her interests, which had prompted her to look round as she pulled the door behind her. Now the keys had been found and lay safe and secret in her clenched fist. Nobody knew and nobody would ever know, so there was no need for shame.

With her restless mood explained away, she might have re-entered the flat to await her daughter's return. Instead she kept to her resolution. Buying a cantaloup melon might have been merely a device of her unconscious to stimulate her into returning to the front door, but, having prepared the excuse, she felt obliged to honour it. Before she returned the keys to her handbag, she used the largest of them in the other lock, an old fashioned one at waist

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level, which was said to be stronger and more reliable.

She had to go as far as Bute Street to find what she wanted, and then, because there was no reason to hurry and the evening air was warm as well as fresh, she walked towards the other end of Bute Street, to the picture dealer's shop near the corner. When her husband was alive, she had possessed a certain amount of knowledge about old pictures and she had never quite lost the interest. She spent quite a time now, only a few yards away from the thrust and noise of the traffic in the Old Brompton Road, peering at paintings in the window, and in the well lighted shop behind, and amusing herself by trying to 'place' those she liked the best and make a guess at what the prices would be.

When she returned to the flat she was not surprised to find that the door opened at once to the small key, the one she had, earlier on, left in the lock. She assumed that her daughter had returned, used the keys to get in, and fastened the door again by pushing it to.

'Barbaral' she called, 'Look what I've brought you.'

She was still holding her handbag, together with the melon in the crook of her left arm, and she did not bother to put on the light in the hall: instead, she pressed down the switch behind the open door of the drawing-room.

No one was there, but the picture, the picture, which was her responsibility as well as her heritage, had gone. The two brass chains had been left, drooping from the staples near the ceiling, but where the big picture had hung there was only a rectangular space faintly outlined on the wall-paper. She realised, in one queasy, chill moment, that the flat had been burgled.

It must have been done while she was out shopping,

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for not half an hour before that she had come in and gone to her bedroom. There was, however, another possibility. The thief might have found the key she left in the lock, let himself in, hidden in the kitchen when he heard her move, watched her depart – and then stolen the picture. She was postulating one thief: it was more likely there had been several. One man would never have been able to lift and move so heavy a picture.

Thieves then. Two or three. They might still be in the flat, waiting somewhere to spring out on her. She half dropped, half threw the melon on to an armchair. Fright made her clumsy and she almost lost her balance as she turned on her high-heeled shoes. Five or six strides, in a skirt made exasperatingly tight by fashion, took her out of the drawing-room, and at the same moment she realised that, by doing this, she was leaving behind her the telephone, the swiftest means of calling the police. There was an extension instrument in her bedroom, but that was one of the places where the thieves might be lurking. Besides, telephone wires could be cut! Safety lay at the front door, beyond the front door, and she set off at a run, her breath coming in short, dry agitations.

As she crossed the hall, she saw the picture, or rather, she caught a glimpse of it, through the open door of the kitchen. It had been placed, as though it were a parcel worth only a few pounds, face downwards on the kitchen table. That meant that her fear was justified: the thieves might still be in the flat! As soon as she had passed through the front door, she slammed it behind her. She ran to the lift and then tumbled and tripped down the stairs, flight after flight. Not one of the other tenants was about but the

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porter, taking the lift upward, must have heard her. He stopped the lift and met her at the first floor.

'What's the matter, Mrs Kent?'

'Burglars!' she told him, and then, for her own satisfaction, repeated the word.

The porter, immediately on the defensive, claimed that he had been off-duty for three-quarters of an hour.

They went together to the street door to look for a policeman. To right and left, all the way along Queen's Gate, there was no policeman to be seen.

A light was showing over the door of one of the ground floor flats: she rang the bell and kept ringing it. While she waited, she sent the porter to stand by the street door and keep watch for her daughter.

'Whatever you do, don't let her go upstairs!'

At last a woman answered the bell, a new tenant, a stranger, who seemed neither to recognise her nor to understand what she was saying. The porter had to leave his post for a moment and vouch for her before the obstinate creature would step aside and let her in to the telephone.

The porter proclaimed from the entrance hall that he would also keep watch for 'any unauthorised person' coming downstairs. She had no belief in the porter's ability to defend her property, or indeed to defend himself: he was too old and even in his youth must have lacked the temperament for fighting. The thieves, if they were still in her flat, would knock him unconscious, or, if it suited them better, tie him up with ropes and a gag. It seemed to her that, heavy though the picture was, a couple of strong resolute men, if they were still lurking upstairs,

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would be able to carry it out of the flat and out of the building and load it on to a van or truck which an accomplice would drive up at exactly the right moment. Everything, or practically everything, she knew about crime came from books and films and television. She had never realised that, intruding into her own life, crime would make her so nervous that she found it difficult to use a telephone dial.

"She did not want an ambulance or a fire engine: she wanted Police. She said so.

Once she had given her name and address, a voice exasperatingly assured her that police officers would be with her 'right away'. The word might mean an interval of a few seconds or a few minutes – or half an hour. Suppose that all the patrols in touch with Scotland Yard by radio were already, in answer to other 999 calls, tracking thieves, stopping brawls, rounding up really important criminals, spies or murderers? 'I ought to have explained,' she reproved herself, 'about the picture!'

As she replaced the telephone receiver, the stupid new tenant, whatever her name was, began to ask questions. Eleanor Kent had no wish to be bothered with her.

'Do you mind if I make another call?'

Without waiting for the woman's consent, she dialled Willie Savoy's number.

He was at home. Her news excited him. She could feel him enjoying vicarious thrills a mile and a half away!

'I'm inquisitive too,' she confessed. 'I can't help wondering what they'll look like.'

Willie had not yet got the hang of things.

'Are they being chased?' he asked. 'Through the streets?'

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'They haven't gone yet. At least, I haven't seen them.' Willie was thoroughly bewildered.

'I'm not speaking from my own flat,' she explained.

There was a pause. For the first time Willie became serious, intense, concerned.

'Eleanor! Are you trying to tell me you've lost the Tintoretto?'

'I don't think so. It's in the kitchen.'

'In the kitchen?' he repeated, letting his voice rise to a hideous falsetto. 'In the kitchen!'

'They must have left it there. On the table.'

'Is it damaged?'

'How do I know? I saw it on the table, I tell you, face down.'

'Eleanor, if that picture has suffered any hurt, any hurt at all, even the tiniest scratch, I don't think I shall ever get over it.'

It was typical of Willie Savoy's conceit and selfishness to talk like that. The picture, after all, was hers, not his, although to be fair, he had for several years taken a strong personal interest in it.

He continued, however, to be quite unhelpful. The shrill note of hysteria returned to his voice as he implored her not to conceal bad news from him.

'So far as I know', she said, masterfully, 'it's still in the flat and undamaged. If that doesn't satisfy you, come and see for yourself.'

The porter appeared at the open door of the strange flat from which she was telephoning. He signalled to her urgently, and then, ignoring the new tenant, said: 'The police have arrived, madam.'

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Over the telephone she passed the news to Willie Savoy and heard him draw a breath of relief – for himself more than for her. Now it was safe to do so, Willie would tear across from Knightsbridge to South Kensington trying to pass himself off as a taxi-borne knight about to rescue a lady in distress.

She thanked the stupid woman and said, smiling: 'With all this todo I mustn't forget to pay for the calls.'

^{††}The woman had enough decency to make noises of protest and abnegation.

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Eleanor Kent insisted concealing the amusement she felt at her own air of grandeur as she put down a shilling, which would more than cover the cost of two calls, apart from the fact (which the poor stupid woman, who was probably quite nice, did not realise) that it cost nothing to dial Scotland Yard if one used the emergency number 999.

In the entrance hall she found a young policeman, an ordinary policeman in an ordinary policeman's tall helmet, waiting for her. With him was an older man wearing a tweed jacket, fawn-coloured trousers, suede shoes and no hat, who said: 'Mrs Kent? I am Sergeant——'

She failed to catch the name.

'Are you,' she demanded, 'the Flying Squad?'

The Sergeant did not deny it, but neither did he (as she would have liked him to do) affirm it. Instead he began to ask questions.

'What else is missing besides the picture?'

It did not seem to occur to him that a picture might be more valuable than jewels or furs.

'I don't know what else is missing. I cleared out. I was

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frightened, if you want to know. And the picture *isn't* missing.'

The Sergeant gave her a look, a man's look at a woman no longer young who has made a fool of herself and caused a lot of unnecessary trouble.

'But,' she said coldly, 'as soon as I went into the room I saw it had been taken down. And that wasn't done by me or my daughter or my housekeeper.'

'Are you sure, madam?'

She was not going to tell him that the reason she was sure was because the three of them together lacked the strength to support the weight of the picture and move it to another room.

'You must take my word for that,' she replied. 'The picture, when I last saw it, was in the kitchen. It had been laid on a table. But I was hurrying to the front door, running if you like.'

'Did you see anyone, madam? Did you hear anyone?'

'Sergeant,' she said, 'every week, almost every day, I read in the papers about some man or woman being hit with a - what do you call it?'

'A cosh,' said the Sergeant. 'It's a pity the papers get hold of criminal's slang. The papers put a lot of nasty ideas into people's heads.'

'Well, it seemed to me that if I had come home a little earlier than was convenient to the men trying to rob my home, they might knock me out with a cosh. So I ran down here and dialled 999. Was I wrong?'

The Sergeant seemed no longer so sure that he had to deal with a neurotic half-wit subject to hallucinations. He gave way. He asked for her keys and went up in the

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lift to see for himself. The porter worked the lift for him.

She stood back and watched the other policeman, the one in uniform, the 'bobby', begin the long walk upstairs. The stairs were built tight around the lift shaft. When he reached the first floor, the 'bobby' paused for a moment, presumably to make sure there was no one on that landing. He set off again. She heard the lift come to a halt and the gates open. The Sergeant would now be entering her flat.

She remembered then – and it was odd that she had not remembered it before – the fact that when she reached home from the City she had left her keys in the door and recovered them only by chance. Whether Freud allowed one any belief in chance as a determinant of one's actions was another matter, not to be gone into now. The reason she felt ashamed of leaving the keys in the door was that it ranked, in old-fashioned terms, as a piece of indefensible carelessness. What other reason could there be? She would have to own up about the keys when, in making the formal statement the police would require of her, she described how she went in, went out, and came back to discover the empty space on the wall.

Above her, the lift gates clicked, and the lift began to descend. When it reached the first floor she saw it had only one occupant, the porter. Old, frail, defeated by life as he was, he had come back with a cockerel glint in his eye and there was a cockerel strut in his ancient legs as he opened the gates and stepped out and then stepped aside for her to enter. She assumed that a notable victory had been won.

'How many?' she asked. 'How many have they arrested?'

She ought to have known better. Scotland Yard, it

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seemed, had made no captures because there was no one in the flat to be captured.

'They must have cleared out,' the porter said, 'before either you or me showed up.'

From the way he talked one would think the burglars had run off, terrified by the prospect of encountering an elderly porter and a widow who had not even been good at school games! Nevertheless, the news was welcome to her.

'The Sergeant says, Mrs Kent, would you go up now and tell him anything that's missing?'

She could feel the last defensive tautness of her nerves relaxing. The good news was also a bit of a let-down.

'Is the picture damaged?'

'That's more than I know. I wasn't allowed inside the flat,' the porter said, resentfully.

She felt sorry for him, deprived of first hand evidence to nourish his talent for gossip, but she did not invite him in.

Scotland Yard had taken charge of what must have already become a case, with a file and a reference number soon to be given it. Her impression was that while Scotland Yard was in the flat, Scotland Yard would decide who came and went.

She went first to the kitchen. The picture was still there, flat on the table: all she could see was the back of the frame and the wooden reverse of the picture itself. The Sergeant would not allow her to touch it.

'I've taken the liberty of using your telephone, madam. I've sent for a photographer in case there are any finger prints, but I expect all we shall find will be glove marks.'

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This looks like a professional job. Neat. No noise. And well-timed.'

That gave her the cue which she was, in honour bound, to take up. She told him how she had come home, stayed only a minute or two, and then gone out for nearly half an hour. She took him into the drawing-room and showed him, lying in the armchair, the melon, with the opening of the paper bag crumpled where she had gripped it.

'It's got all the marks of a two or three man job,' the Sergeant decided. 'The likeliest thing is, they slipped past the porter – that wouldn't be hard – as soon as they saw your daughter go out. That told them the flat was empty. Whether the door was double locked wouldn't make much difference. They'd open one lock with cellophane and the other with a skeleton.'

By 'skeleton' he must mean a skeleton key and she would not know one if she saw it, but if thieves could open a door as easily as Scotland Yard implied, there would be no point in mentioning the key she had left for a few minutes in the lock. After all, she thought, every moment it was there I was in the flat, in my own bedroom, and I'm sure no one came in then!

The Sergeant, having satisfied himself about the method of robbery, wanted to know exactly what had been stolen. At his bidding the other policeman took out a notebook, and they all three went round the flat, room by room. One or two things, she fancied, might be out of place but she could not be sure. There was no disorder and nothing of value seemed to be missing. Her jewel case had not, apparently, been opened or even moved. The Sergeant asked for an estimate of the value of the contents, and,

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when he was given it, looked disappointed. However, he forbade her to touch the case for fear she smudged fingerprints. The deed box, in which she kept bank receipts for securities, was where it ought to be, at the back of a cupboard, on the top shelf. Her silver, her china, her glass, and the other pictures seemed to have been ignored.

'It looks,' the Sergeant concluded as they returned to the kitchen, 'as though they were interested in only one thing – this picture. And that's odd.'

It wasn't odd at all!

The front door bell rang and the other policeman, the 'bobby', admitted a man carrying a camera tripod and two bags. Behind him, white-faced, pop-eyed, stood Willie Savoy.

He was a big man, and broad shouldered. His clean-shaven face always looked pallid under the thatch of red hair which by now would have lost its colour, as well as its lustre, but for drastic dyeing. He took off his broad-brimmed soft felt hat, the hat which informed the world that his interests were artistic, and it flapped in his hand behind her shoulder as he held her in a brief, unmuscular embrace and mildly squelched a kiss on her cheek.

This duty performed, he became brisk and even imperious, blowing out his chest as if to remind her that he was Willie Savoy, long accustomed to being a celebrity in his own world.

'Let me see it!' he demanded.

He knew his way to the kitchen, and he could move quite fast when he wanted. The Sergeant, taken by surprise, shouted as Willie bent over the over-turned picture on the table.

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‘Don’t touch that! Don’t touch it, I say!’

Willie was not a man to quarrel with the police. His private life must make him apprehensive and now for a long moment he remained in the same undignified position, bent forward from the hips, tense and still. It was as if he feared that the Sergeant had access to some secret criminal records in which the name of Savoy was entered. As he straightened up and turned, she could see a pitiable timidity in his eyes. He listened attentively while the Sergeant delivered a homily, informal, learned-by-heart phrases, on the importance of finger-prints in criminal investigation.

Slowly the apprehension ebbed out of his face, and when the Sergeant finished, it was Willie who exhibited the greater self-confidence.

‘Very well,’ he said, ‘but get your man in here at once.’

He was the one who was giving the orders!

The Sergeant replied that the paint and glass and metal plates on the front door would have to be photographed first, but Willie repeated: ‘At once. I also have a duty to perform. I must submit this picture to a thorough examination.’

The Sergeant looked to her for enlightenment.

‘Mr Savoy,’ she told him, ‘is an art historian.’

The two magical words rang no bell in the Sergeant’s mind.

‘He is an expert on Venetian painting.’

‘Oh,’ said the Sergeant. ‘Old Masters, is that what you mean?’

He had accepted the idea at last but on his own terms and in his own idiom.

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'Is *this* one?' he asked, pointing to the picture on the table.

'It's a Tintoretto,' Willie informed him. 'What's more, it's a unique Tintoretto. There isn't another one to match it anywhere in the world.'

The Sergeant was impressed but inquisitive. He fetched the finger-print man from the front door. It upset Willie to see white powder, lifted with a brush from a metal box, scattered over the back of the carved frame and, in three different places, on the cradled reverse of the wood panel.

'Isn't it a bit unusual, to keep an Old Master picture in a flat?'

'Plenty of people own valuable pictures, and hang them on their walls, but you're right, Sergeant. As I told you, this one is unique.'

The photographer pressed his shutter release for the last time, switched off the floodlight and said to the Sergeant: 'What do you want me to call these shots? The picture? Or the oil painting? Or what?'

'You can call it,' said Willie Savoy with relish, 'the "Venus with the Fan"'. And now perhaps I may be allowed to examine it?'

He superintended the raising of the picture from the table, the Sergeant lifting one end, the police photographer the other. Willie would not have the picture turned over flat; instead he made them hold it up and lower it gently and vertically until the bottom of the frame was resting on the table.

'What a weight!' said the Sergeant.

Willie produced his magnifying glass from his waistcoat pocket. He was never without it. He switched on the

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floodlight himself and moved it every now and again as he examined the whole of the paint surface up to the edges of the frame.

From where they stood, each with one gloved hand touching the picture frame and holding it in place, neither the Sergeant nor the photographer could see the painting well; they were too close and the angle of vision was too sharp. All they could be sure of was the nakedness of the Venus. The finger-print photographer remained stolid. The Sergeant, however, already stimulated by what must be the first glimpse in his adult life of an 'Old Master', seemed gratified that it had turned out to be a depiction of a voluptuously beautiful young woman. He wanted to see more and when he did he would not be interested in the *putti*, the background figure of Mars or the landscape. Meanwhile it titillated his sense of humour to watch Willie Savoy at work with the magnifying glass close to his right eye, scrutinising inch by inch the belly and hips and thighs of the Venus.

Willie's conscience was satisfied at last.

'That'll do,' he said. 'I fancy there's rather more craquelure there, and there, compared with the last time I went over it, but that's only to be expected.'

'Could you put that into plain English, sir?'

'The thieves have not damaged the picture at all.'

'Did you observe any finger-prints on the paint?'

'No. Not one.'

'You're sure, sir?'

'Positive.'

'Then there's only the front of the frame we need photograph.'

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'Perhaps,' she suggested, 'I could hold one end for you?'

It was an act of kindness, for the Sergeant could now view the picture as a whole and from in front of it.

'Oh, I say,' he exclaimed. 'I say!'

'You like it?'

'Very striking. Very striking indeed, sir.'

She wondered what it was like to look at the 'Venus with the Fan' with an unsophisticated mind and for the first time. To her the picture had been disclosed gradually, over a period of weeks, one irregular section of it after another. The first area to be fully revealed was, she remembered suddenly, the little boy who had propped an open book of verses against a tree trunk and was pretending to be able to read.

'Don't you think it's charming?' she asked.

The Sergeant agreed and then found another adjective he considered more suitable.

'Dainty, that's what it is, Mrs Kent. Dainty!'

It was probably the first time the word had ever been applied to a Tintoretto composition.

As soon as the frame had been photographed for finger-prints, the other policeman was brought in and conscripted to make up a team of three to carry the picture into the drawing room. Willie superintended. He showed them how the inverted steel hooks at the back of the frame fitted into the rings on the end of the wall chains. Only then did he allow the photographer and the uniformed constable to hoist the picture and lower it again. He himself tested the hang of the chains and hooks and rings before he consented to stand back and appreciate the return of the picture to its rightful setting.

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'Excuse me, sir, but are most Old Masters as heavy as this one?'

'Certainly not. Canvas is quite light – though you can have a canvas in a heavy frame. This is painted on a wooden panel. Oak. Exceptionally big too. And in addition I had it cradled to prevent the wood warping.'

'All those battens and cross pieces at the back?'

'Exactly. And you perceive, I hope, Sergeant, that I have given you quite a clue there.'

The Sergeant perceived nothing of the sort. For a moment or two Willie Savoy enjoyed his moral ascendancy and then diplomatically offered Scotland Yard a line of retreat with honour.

'I have an advantage over you, Sergeant, in that I am in possession of the facts, all the facts, about this picture. It is a famous one. It is known to all scholars and connoisseurs of Venetian painting. It has been exhibited at Burlington House. It is cited and accepted by Berenson, but it has never been vulgarly publicised. I mean it has never been the subject of sensational articles, "news stories" I believe they are called, in the popular press.'

Willie was almost making a speech.

'The thieves, whoever they prove to be, if you ever catch them,' he continued, 'are, you can take it from me, to some extent, literate. They can read more than the football results in the Saturday evening papers. They must have read somewhere about the "Venus with the Fan" and made enquiries among some of the hangers-on of the art world. Or that is my guess. In that way they would learn the value of the picture in terms of money.'

'And what would that be, sir?'

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The Sergeant was eager for a reply, but it disappointed him.

'Mrs Kent is the owner. She no doubt has had it valued for insurance purposes.'

Too well Willie knew that she had had it valued. The Sergeant turned to her.

'Am I bound to tell?' she asked.

In the Sergeant's eyes she saw the reluctant admission.

'But I dare say,' she suggested, 'Mr Savoy might give you an estimate – an expert estimate.'

Three pairs of policemen's eyes were now fixed hopefully and respectfully on Willie.

'It can be only an estimate,' he said. 'In the present state of the international art market, with demand far exceeding supply, and prices breaking records every season, it is impossible for anyone to say what this picture would fetch if it were for sale. Many years have passed since a major Tintoretto came up in the saleroom and this one is, I repeat, unique. At the very least it would sell for a hundred thousand pounds.'

Awe spread over three attentive faces, but the round figure was no more than a preliminary flourish.

'However,' Willie said, 'I don't imagine that Mrs Kent would dream of parting with it at that price. Neither Christie's nor Sotheby's, I am sure, would advise her to fix a reserve so low. I myself would say not a penny less than two hundred thousand pounds. And it would not at all surprise me if it ran to a quarter of a million. Or more.'

To listen to him anyone might well have concluded that she, Eleanor Kent, was the sort of woman who never does a stroke of work and seeks her pleasures the year



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round between Paris, London, New York and Monte Carlo.

'Then why,' the Sergeant demanded, 'did they lift it down and move it as far as the kitchen – but no further?'

'That's the point,' Willie told him. 'Only scholars of art bother about details like exact dimensions, the medium used, and the ground – the ground is what the paint is applied to. And nobody bothered to tell the enterprising thieves that this picture happens to be painted on a heavy wood panel. They came expecting to cut a canvas out of a frame, roll it up and walk away with it. They found that it wasn't so simple.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the Sergeant. 'Now it begins to make sense'

CHAPTER TWO

An Impossible Situation

Willie Savoy stayed on after the Police had left.

'I don't like the idea of you being here alone,' he explained.

'Neither do I,' she thought, but she kept the thought unspoken. She offered him sherry. To her Tio Pepe had a bitter medicinal tang, but Willie responded with delight to so well approved a name. She shocked him by pouring whisky for herself.

'That's better,' she said. 'Now listen, Willie, I need your advice. Ought I to inform the Insurance Company?'

'Are you going to claim?'

'There's nothing to claim for. But am I under an obligation to report an attempted theft?'

'That's the sort of question you ought to put to your solicitor.'

'If I do, he'll play safe and say yes, better report it.'

'Then why not take his advice without either asking or paying for it? Send the Insurance Company a letter to-morrow. It can't do any harm, can it?'

Even people, like Willie, who prided themselves on their delicate nerves and exquisite sensibilities, were likely, when it came to seeing a situation from another person's point of view, to be short of imagination.

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'It might do me a lot of harm,' she said. 'Where are we? Near the middle of March. The policy runs year by year and in May it's due for renewal. If they hear about this, I expect they'll increase the premium again.'

'How much are you paying now?'

She told him.

The whites enlarged around the pupils of his eyes.

'Well!' he said. 'Well! Of course, as I told the police, it's impossible to set a limit on the value, but perhaps you ought to go to another company?'

'I've tried five. Not one of them would insure the picture for more than a hundred thousand. It *is*,' she asked anxiously, 'worth more, isn't it?'

'A lot more,' he maintained.

'One hears stories about insurance companies,' she said.

'What sort of stories?'

'Sometimes they just refuse to pay up. Sometimes they offer part payment.'

'In that case,' said Willie, 'you could go to Law about it.'

'And should I have any hope of winning?'

'They might try bluff,' Willie admitted. 'They'd say to themselves, here's a widow——'

She took over and completed for him the description of herself as an insurance company might see her. '— Not terribly well off. Has to work for her living. Yet she owns a picture worth far more than anything else she possesses. Now she's lost it and is claiming. She ought to have taken better care of it. She was asking for trouble keeping it in a flat.'

'That,' Willie agreed, 'is the sort of line they might take,

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though they wouldn't put it into those words. But you still have the picture and if you ask *me* you'll never be burgled again.'

'How can you say that?'

'The only people likely to try to steal a valuable picture are professional criminals. By this time the word will have gone round that the "Venus with the Fan" is on wood, not canvas. Too heavy to handle easily. And remember they couldn't break it up like a diamond necklace or melt it down like gold. It would have to be sold as it stands. And who would buy a picture so well known? The customer would need to be either a millionaire or a museum. No museum would risk it. A millionaire? But why should he? He'd never dare to put it up on his walls.'

'There's not only robbery,' she said. 'There's fire. The policy is very complicated and rather vague about it, but if there's a fire in these flats, no matter where it originates, the onus is more or less on me to get the picture removed to a place of safety. And I simply couldn't do that by myself, even with Barbara and Miss Henderson to help.'

She refilled the sherry glass but poured no more whisky for herself.

'It's an awful responsibility,' she said. 'It's an incubus. It's my "Old Man of the Sea".'

'I realise why you don't sell,' Willie Savoy conceded, 'but surely you are morally free to give it to the National Gallery?'

What had happened in the past half hour must have worked on her nerves, for she felt the flesh over her right knee-cap quivering, ridiculously as if she were a young girl instead of a woman of forty.

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'Why the hell should I?' she retorted. 'You're not the first to hint that the "Venus" ought to go to Trafalgar Square and for nothing. But I can't see it. What has the National Gallery ever done for me?'

Poor Willie was upset by the roughness of her voice, the aggressiveness of her manner.

'As it was Claude's dying wish that you should not sell the picture——'

'I was there,' she said. 'You weren't. Let me remind you that the actual words he used were – "Never part with the Venus"!''

She was the guardian of her husband's repute and of his last behest. Just now, as she had done these last nine years, she had amended the words slightly. She did it not to falsify the meaning but to protect her husband from criticism. She had protected him all their short married life and she had protected his memory through the sixteen years she had been a widow. What Claude actually said on his death-bed was: 'Never part with the Titian!'

Claude Kent had been an art historian, a museum official, a man of unfulfilled promise, and he died believing the picture, which he bought at a small wartime auction sale, to be the work of Titian. Nobody shared his belief and it was only when she had £50 to spare, in 1951, and asked Willie Savoy to advise her about having the picture cleaned, that the underlying paint was brought to light. It had cost a lot more than £50 to complete the restoration which left her with a priceless masterpiece. It left her also with the knowledge that what her husband had believed to be the work of Titian was over-painting done by some anonymous hack two hundred years after Titian died.

So that no one should be reminded of Claude Kent's misapprehension about what she owned as a Tintoretto, she nowadays recounted her husband's dying behest with a tiny adjustment important to nobody but herself. She made him say not: 'Never part with the Titian!' but 'Never part with the Venus!' In this way, the picture was taken out of the category of poor Claude's enthusiastic blunders and he was commemorated as a collector of small means but remarkable taste and discernment, the man who had rescued from oblivion a Tintoretto of such quality that Willie did not exaggerate when he described it as unique.

The name of William Savoy would also be attached to it, in the chronicles of art history, in perpetuity; he had 'published it', writing about the 'new' Tintoretto, with photographs and a learned argument, in the *Burlington Magazine*. This was the approved way of announcing an art discovery to the art experts of the whole world.

'You have got yourself,' Willie told her now, but gently, almost wistfully, 'into an impossible situation.'

'It exists,' she objected. 'Therefore it can't be impossible.'

At that, Willie launched himself, as sleek and effortless as a red-haired old seal, into one of his miniature lectures. All art historians were liable, on one pretext or another, to substitute discourse for conversation.

'We must not talk at cross purposes,' he began, implying that she had no right to let her purposes conflict with his. 'The phrase "an impossible situation" belongs to criticism, to literary criticism, I fancy, which is rather out of my province. As I understand it – and I've no reason to believe I misunderstand it – an impossible situation is one which cannot be maintained for much longer.'

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'But what,' she asked, doing her best to ruin the lecture before it had properly begun, 'do you mean by "situation"?'

Willie could never refuse a challenge to give a definition.

'A situation, surely, is a relationship between people, between at least two people.'

'This is between me and the picture,' she objected. 'It's not only impossible, it isn't a situation at all.'

'Yes it is,' said Willie. 'I can prove it. Barbara's involved as well as you. So am I to some extent. And Claude too.'

He would have done better not to mention Claude. It wasn't tactful. He realised it and hurried on.

'An impossible situation is impossible and bound to come to an end because it is open to too many or too strong pressures. From outside or from inside.'

'I am going to keep the picture,' she exclaimed, coming to the decision at the same moment that she announced it. 'I'll pay whatever the insurance people make me pay. But I'll keep it. So the situation will go on. It won't come to an end. How *does* an impossible situation come to an end, anyhow?'

'Suddenly.'

'But how?'

'It explodes, I suppose.'

'Doesn't it sometimes just collapse? Couldn't the pressures gradually deflate it? Not with a bang but a whimper?'

Willie, his lecture cut short against his will, gave her a resentful stare from under his rust-coloured, uneasy eyebrows.

'Not with you,' he said. 'If it ends, it will be an explosion.'

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'Why,' she cried, 'you've paid me a compliment, Willie! I mean a real one, not one of your smoothie bits of nonsense.'

She heard the front door being opened.

'I only hope,' Willie went on, 'that if and when the explosion happens, I'm at a safe distance.'

Barbara came into the room. Barbara would have to be told about the burglars and, later on, there would be Miss Henderson. The thought of going through the whole story for a third time was intolerable. Barbara would just have to wait for the details until Miss Henderson got home. The child looked pretty and pleased with herself and, this evening, quite remarkably like her father as, with a nod and a smile to Willie, she came straight across to her mother. As soon as the kiss pulsed schoolgirlishly warm and uncontrolled on her cheek, Mrs Kent knew that her daughter's emotions had been freshly aroused. What, she wondered, was the latest enthusiasm?

CHAPTER THREE

Mother and Daughter

There was no hypocrisy in Barbara Kent's affection for her mother. She thought of her as a 'darling', endowed with all kinds of estimable qualities which Barbara herself could never hope to match. Her mother was practical, she worked at an office in Cheapside for a merchant house dealing in textiles. People said that, had she been a man, Eleanor Kent would have been elected to the board of directors long ago. Barbara was proud of her mother, but not in the same spontaneous way she was proud of her dead father, whom she resembled in looks and, she hoped, in temperament.

She had decided, about a year ago, that her mother had never understood her and never would. It was nobody's fault. It was a misfortune, like her father's untimely death when she was still a child and he just approaching what would have been the climax, not the conclusion, of his distinguished career. Barbara, who was to read philosophy as well as political and economic science at Oxford, was not surprised to detect in herself elements of Stoicism. She saw herself as a girl trained from childhood to accept misfortunes, but, less narrowminded than the old Stoics, she was aware that life offered compensations. One was sometimes excited, sometimes happy. There were things to

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believe in, and people to believe in too. Life could be endured.

Her mother asked if she had liked the lecture, what it was about and who gave it?

She left the last two questions unanswered, but described the lecture as 'quite wonderful'.

'It was at the Institution' she said. 'I got an invitation on the strength of knowing people – and my name, of course.'

Willie Savoy understood.

'She's been to a lecture on art history. Well, well! Never known you come to one of mine, young woman.'

Barbara had no use for him. She had lately decided that he had been a false friend to her father, remaining ignobly alive when Claude Kent had had to die, publishing commonplace articles which her father would have done memorably, and brief books which her father would have written as long, important books, and gradually, year after year, usurping the credit for the discovery of the picture, the great Tintoretto, in front of which he now stood, on her mother's hearth rug, plump, pallid, rufous-haired. Some of the students at the Institute called him Winsome Willie, but that was too kind. He was, notoriously, a petty-minded snob, a gossip, and pompous and a bit of a bore into the bargain.

She did not want to talk to Willie but Willie wanted to talk to her and he could not be halted, babbling out news which surely ought to have been broken by her mother? It was to her mother that Barbara turned, as if in a family conference, the two of them that were left out of the family of three. Her mother was quite a big woman,

tall and substantial, but she did not look bulky or awkward. She had fair hair, quite a lot of it, dressed to a high, neat, almost classical cone around her head and behind it. She was wearing one of her business suits, of dark green silk, braided, with one gold brooch. She looked, Barbara was always ready to concede, young for her age, young and alert and composed. She was quite beautiful in a way which no doubt lacked subtlety and depth, and perhaps lacked charm also, Barbara judged, but it was beyond dispute that her face had a thin-cheeked, thin-nosed, grey-eyed distinction. It was brisk, and perhaps brave, in total effect: an undaunted kind of face.

Undaunted was the word. The fact that her home had been burgled and she had nearly come face to face with the burglars did not seem to upset Eleanor Kent at all.

'But it's terrible,' her daughter cried. 'We might have lost the "Venus"!''

She was pleased that they had had a burglary, because to be burgled was not only exciting in itself but carried some social prestige. She was pleased that the burglary had failed, because the picture was to be her inheritance and constituted a bond between her and the father she had lost. Out of these pleasures came another, a delightful and purposeful idea which arrived suddenly in her mind. It was the sort of idea she would never be able to communicate or wish to communicate; it would have to be kept secret, but in order to accomplish it, she needed her mother's assistance. The conception of herself she was always trying to live up to forbade her to tell a lie to her mother. The approach had to be direct but she saw that she need reveal only one corner of the idea. Even that could

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not be done until Willie Savoy was out of the way.

He went at last.

'What do you say?' her mother asked. 'Shall we go out and eat?'

When Miss Henderson was off duty they were always liable to be faced with the same choice, between getting a meal for themselves in the flat or walking to one of the nearby restaurants. This time Barbara preferred to stay in and said so at once. Anything was better than going out to mix with other people who could only have been distracting. Her mother's temperament was different from hers, more worldly, more physical, more dependent on things like food and drink. Consciously and with some pride in her own self-control, Barbara decided to postpone until after the meal the little talk in which she would exhibit to her mother all that her mother needed to know of the idea.

Meanwhile, opening up a table beside the fire in the drawing-room and setting it with knives and forks and plates and other necessities, Barbara abstracted her thoughts and let them loose to re-enact what she had seen and heard and felt in the lecture room of a building in Bloomsbury earlier in the evening.

Quite often she found herself turning up for appointments either scandalously late or absurdly early and for the lecture she presented herself at the Institute doors some time before her friends arrived. She was the first to enter the austere furnished lecture room which was also a small projection theatre with, at the end where the speaker's desk stood, a bare white wall on which cinema films could be shown. On this occasion, photographic

slides were to be projected at intervals on to the white screen, illustrating paintings about which the lecturer would make learned comments. Such lectures were not delivered, much less spoken, but read, neither loudly nor clearly, from a manuscript which the lecturer held in the shaded illumination provided by a lamp at the top of his reading desk. The picture projected on the screen would change every twenty minutes or so but the voice would drone on for an hour and a half in the same inexpressive monotone.

While Barbara watched the rest of the small audience arrive, by ones and twos, and settle into their places, her recollections of the sort of lecture that was delivered in this sort of place became more detailed, more depressing. Some years ago she had abandoned all pretence of keeping up with the art historical world, which after all had not treated her father well, and had failed to provide him with a university chair or a senior appointment in a museum. Nobody, she thought, could deny that Claude Kent had possessed a flair for great pictures – the ‘Venus with the Fan’ testified to that. She had no such flair, and she therefore turned her attention away from the world that had been her father’s world. She did not, however, lose contact altogether.

A few weeks before, at a party, a philosophy don, benignant with port, had told her that long before most people heard of a new public name in any of the liberal arts, there passed among the discerning few, the few on whose judgment reputations depended, whispers, surmises and rumours. Some were sifted out and came to nothing. One or two survived the sifting, and concerning them the

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whispers grew louder and louder until the time arrived for public acclamation. The don had implied, rather than stated, that there was immense kudos in being a member of the discerning few, the intellectual oligarchy, who, in each profession created new reputations; the next best thing was to be 'in the know' before the new name was actually established. As soon as she heard her friends discussing James Hogan, Barbara had recalled the philosophy don's solemn counsel. She decided then and there that it would be worth her while to be present at what might turn out to be, for those who cared about such things, an occasion, a memorable event, something to be recorded in reminiscences published twenty, thirty or forty years on.

The young man, James Hogan, had proved to be not so young after all. Barbara was neither surprised nor disappointed by this. He delivered a talk which, in substance and manner, was very different from what she and, it was soon apparent, a number of other people had expected. His appearance was not that of a man associated with the arts or with scholarship. He was not tall and thin, with small bones and a languid manner, nor rotund, smooth skinned and plummy voiced. Neither was he – which would have been permissible – either ugly or eccentric. He wrote art criticism for one of the daily papers. Perhaps that was why what he had to say exerted a lively and compelling effect on his audience, even on those who clearly disagreed with what he said. An upbringing somewhere in the North of England affected his enunciation, which flattened the vowel sounds, especially the 'a', and in words like 'condition' and 'construction' put an emphasis, followed by a tiny pause, on the first syllable.

His Northernness showed a little in the cut of his clothes, perhaps, and the way his hair grew tuftily out of his scalp, and in the way he stood and moved about. Afterwards, at the end of the lecture, Barbara heard more than one person use the word 'provincial'. She herself had become a partisan of James Hogan as soon as she perceived that there were people in the audience who bore him no goodwill and that he would have to earn any triumph that came his way. Barbara saw him as a man who knew what he wanted. She admired him for that.

She admired him also because he ignored the conventions of the art historical address. The lights were dimmed on only three occasions, while a number of photographs, of drawings as well as of paintings, were shown on the screen. As each showing ended, the full lighting was restored. Then, and not till then, the lecturer resumed his address. It was an address rather than a lecture, improvised, not read, with only an occasional glance at a single sheet of notes. Some would afterwards find fault with him not only for provinciality, but for an unscholarly method; sentences were sometimes left incomplete or one sentence confused with the next; there were colloquialisms in the improvised text, not calculated for effect but casually used because they came to mind at a given moment more readily than formal phrases. Nevertheless, every moment that he was speaking James Hogan held his audience, every member of it, including the unwilling ones and the critical ones, with his bright blue, intense eyes and also, perhaps, with his sustained argument.

What that argument was, precisely, Barbara could not afterwards have said. It was concerned with the history

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and nature of the art movement called 'Mannerism', chiefly in Northern Italy of the sixteenth century, but with references also to France and the Netherlands as well as to later periods. The lecturer, it seemed, was in favour of Mannerism – provided he was allowed to define it himself; but he thought the name, taken from Italian, an unfortunate one in English, because it was also used for personal affectations. He was, himself, quite obviously against affectations. He postulated the physical elegance of the human body as an essential of Mannerism, and for that reason, rejected the claim of Giulio Romano to be a Mannerist. He held Perino del Vago's importance in the development of Mannerism underrated, and argued that too much emphasis had been laid on the native Venetian qualities of Tintoretto and too little on his achievements in successfully importing, from Florence and Rome, Mannerist innovations.

It was at quite a late moment in his address that James Hogan cited, as examples of Tintoretto's Mannerism, several well known pictures. One of them was the 'Venus with the Fan'. At the time it gave Barbara an intense throb of pleasure to hear so public a commendation of a painting which hung in her own home. It was as if, she thought, a new generation, the generation to which she belonged, had arisen to re-affirm the proposition that Claude Kent, her father, had been blessed with a quite remarkable flair for detecting the authentically great in art. Now, recalling the moment, she saw again, with a gratifying vividness, the confident demeanour and forceful gestures of the man called James Hogan. Without realising it, she had kept in her memory a sharply defined image of him, an image

enveloped by an aura as if, by his own words, he had claimed and secured for himself the approval which her father, being dead, could no longer give but would, indubitably, have given.

The meal Eleanor Kent prepared was a substantial one; it took some time to consume, each course being carried in from the kitchen and then back again. For Barbara's purpose, all this was wasted time. When at last her mother brought in the coffee, she considered it could not now be long before she found a moment favourable for propounding her idea. She made herself attentive to her mother's needs and, although she was unaware of this, her voice became more musical, her expression more charming.

Her mother noticed nothing but poured herself a second cup of coffee, drank it and said: 'I'm tired. I think I'll go to bed early.'

Here was a crisis, and it arose so suddenly that Barbara was unable to make any temporising comment at all.

'Be a good girl. Put all the dirty dishes in the machine. Then Miss Henderson won't have a grouse against us.'

'But don't you want to talk?' Barbara protested.

'What about?'

'The burglars of course. And how we're going to see it doesn't happen again.'

'What I need is a little peace and quiet to think it all out.'

'I,' declared Barbara, 'have already been thinking.'

It was useless to hope for a more favourable opportunity. Her mother's mind, once she admitted herself to be tired and ready for a hot bath, was almost impermeable, and in the morning she would be a brisk business woman rushing through breakfast, intent only on starting another day's

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work at her office. Good, bad or indifferent, the present moment was the only one.

'I've got an idea. I think you ought to take another opinion.'

Her mother smiled and Barbara was insulted by the smile in which she saw an amused condescension towards a child essaying, not quite successfully, the phraseology of the adult world. Her mother was always behaving as though she were exempt from the effects of Time and it was in keeping with this tiresome weakness for her to forget that her little girl had become a woman. Barbara demonstrated her own maturity to her own satisfaction by concealing, if not mastering, the resentment she felt.

'Well,' she argued, 'a doctor is always ready to consult another doctor. So why take Willie Savoy's word for it?'

'About the insurance?'

'About everything,' Barbara said. 'Some people think Willie's pretty old hat.'

'Some people,' her mother retorted, 'means, I suppose, one or two of your friends. Willie may be getting on, and I know he has some absurd ways, but don't forget I owe a lot to him. And so do you.'

That was something her mother should never have said, to her or to anyone else. It was disloyal. It hinted, it almost implied, that simply because Claude Kent, overworked, his health run down by wartime strains, had not had sufficient time before his early death to examine as thoroughly as he would have liked the important picture which he – he and no one else – had bought, the 'Venus with the Fan' was to be regarded not as his but as Willie Savoy's discovery.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Barbara could not trust herself to speak. Her mother, imperceptive as ever, salvaged the situation by conceding: 'You may be right all the same. It couldn't do any harm to take another opinion.'

Once again Barbara put her indignation aside as a dutiful daughter shou'd. dropping it into a limbo from which it could, if necessity arose, be instantly recalled. Meanwhile, she forgot it completely and was ready to pour affection without stint over her mother.

Her mother spoiled it by saying: 'I'll have a word with Peter Paul.'

'Oh no, mother, you can't! You simply can't do that!'

'Whyever not?'

'He's a dealer.'

'That's the point. He's reckoned to be the biggest dealer in the country.'

'Peter Paul' was a nickname for P. P. Robinson, on whose birth certificate, in fact, the forenames entered were Percy and Philip. He was a flamboyant character who did not deny, and might have originated, the story that in his early days, before he became rich and could afford to be scrupulous, he had put his initials, conveniently the same as those of Peter Paul Rubens, on certain faked drawings bought by him cheap and sold dear.

'I know he's a bit of a rascal,' her mother said, missing the point entirely, 'but he likes me and he won't charge for any advice he gives.'

'But you couldn't believe a word of it. There's nothing he would like better than to persuade you to sell to him.'

'He never makes any bones about it. But I see what you mean. Well, who do you suggest instead?'

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At last it had come — the opportunity to bring about what she wanted in such a way that she could ever afterwards maintain that the initiative came from her mother.

The name of James Hogan rang no bell at all.

‘He gave the lecture I went to this evening.’

To her mother, this statement seemed irrelevant. The relevance had to be explained.

‘You see, he mentioned our ‘Venus’. He had quite a lot to say about it. If you were to ask him, I believe he’d be glad to come along here and examine it.’

‘A lot of people would! I’m always having to tell them that this flat isn’t a public gallery.’

‘But Mr Hogan’s an expert. It’s his special subject.’

‘What is?’

‘Mannerism.’

Her mother was perhaps genuinely tired after all, for when ~~she~~ heard, when they both heard, the sound which announced that the housekeeper had opened the front door of the flat, she said: ‘I’m going to bed. I’ve had enough tonight. You tell her the news.’

‘But what about Mr Hogan? Won’t you write to him?’

‘*You* know him. *You* do the inviting. Will he want a fee?’

Barbara shook her head.

‘I shan’t put it that way. I’ll offer him the privilege of seeing the “Venus” for himself. He’ll be grateful. He’ll jump at the chance of coming here.’

As soon as she had spoken she wondered if it were true.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dreams Come True

When William Savoy walked down the stairs and out into Queen's Gate, he saw the blue and gold lights of a taxi cab proceeding sedately and hopefully towards him. A short walk would have brought him to the route of the No. 74 buses but, although it meant that he would be taking his second taxi ride in a single day, he held up his hand and stopped the cab.

Rarely moving out of the West End, he would have described himself, if put to the question, as a frequent passenger on the red double-deck omnibuses of London Transport which looked much the same as before the War but were, in fact, scarcer, dearer, more crowded, and so jerkily driven that passengers were always liable to bruises and often to broken bones. In practice, Savoy rarely boarded a bus if he could find a plausible excuse not to do so. On the way now to his club, he made sure that he had enough silver coins in his trousers pocket to pay; he believed that it cost him more if he had to offer a taxi driver a pound note or even a ten shilling note and ask for change, because then there was a moral pressure to make the tip larger than if he were able to drop two or three silver coins into the man's hand and turn away. He discovered now that he had a useful assortment – two half-crowns, a

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florin, two shillings and three sixpenny pieces. The fare, he calculated, would not run up to more than four shillings. With the change at his disposal he could manage quite nicely.

The driver chose what was usually the most economical route, cutting behind South Kensington Underground into Walton Street and so, with a sharp right turn into Pont Street, across the gardens of Cadogan Place to the south side of Belgrave Square. This carried Savoy close to his own house in a fashionable mews: he rarely ate a meal there except breakfast.

The next part of the drive displeased him, as it always did, for it involved a tiresome detour along Grosvenor Gardens and round the Buckingham Palace Mews and the side of the Palace itself to reach the Mall. He reckoned that, by their choice of a London residence, the Royal House of Windsor cost him at least an extra sixpence almost every time he went out of doors. Tall white flagposts had been erected in the Mall for the coming visit of the French President, General de Gaulle. It would be an obvious economy, of which he loyally approved, to keep the flagposts in place and use them for Princess Margaret's wedding in May. He remembered the shock with which he had read the newspaper headlines announcing that the Queen's sister was to marry a professional photographer, and even now his wounded sense of *comme il faut* was only partly soothed by the thought that the bridegroom was an Old Etonian.

The fare came to three shillings and ninepence, and at the last moment he ruffled through the coins in his pocket and brought out for the driver not two half crowns but

one, together with a two-shilling piece, so that he had, without deceiving himself, earned back the extra sixpence he had to pay because Buckingham Palace and its grounds happened to lie between Eleanor Kent's flat and St James's.

Inside the club, when he had washed his hands, he remembered that he had already taken two glasses of quite passable sherry, provided free, which handsomely offset the taxi fare.

While he dined, at a small table, alone, for he saw no other member with whom he could, just then, bear to converse, he considered the proposition that he had wasted valuable time by answering an appeal from the widow of Claude Kent, a man who never had been, and never would have become – so long as William Savoy was on the committee! – a member of this club. When he finished his half-bottle of claret, he was disposed to concede that, because he would have felt chagrin not to be told of the attempted robbery and not to see for himself that it had failed, he might very well regard his expedition to Queen's Gate as a necessary chore.

Eleanor Kent was a woman but beginning now to mature towards the age when, to Savoy's way of thinking, women became socially an asset. This was because they then began to look like the mothers of men. Eleanor, it was true, had given birth only to a girl child, now grown into a pert young woman distressingly like her father to look at. Absurd, pretentious, ineffectual as Claude Kent had been, no one could deny that he had been a strikingly handsome man and Savoy was well aware that Claude Kent's daughter, in the eyes of men with a different outlook from his, would appear not only beautiful but desirable.

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He allowed for this fact without letting it impinge on his strictly private opinion that Barbara would turn out to be just as big a fool as her father.

Eleanor Kent was another cup of tea altogether. Savoy had known her many years and watched her grow from a young wife into a young widow and then into a capable and – how unlike her husband! – successful business woman. She was far removed from him in temperament and interests but in many ways he admired her and he had never, not even in his secret thoughts, mocked her for her one serious defect of character, her one major foible; this was her obstinate, almost pious veneration for her husband as a scholar of art. Claude Kent had been cremated, but his widow maintained a perpetual shrine to his memory and saw to it that no one in her presence failed to pay due reverence to it.

It suited him very well that she had kept the 'Venus' painting in strict conformity with the wishes of a man ridiculous even on his death-bed, a man who believed to the end that he had bought for £25 a genuine Titian. To William Savoy, who alone had the discernment and the enterprise to find out what lay under the pseudo-Titian repaint, it was an excellent arrangement that the 'Venus', proved by him to be a Tintoretto and therefore, in every but the merely proprietorial sense, *his* Tintoretto, should be installed in a flat to which he always had access when he wanted it, while other art historians and scholars found it almost impossible to gain admission. Eleanor Kent worked, and worked hard, for a livelihood and it was not surprising that she demurred and, more often than not refused, when she was asked to have strangers in to view

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the picture. Her evenings and her week-ends were her only leisure time and as for people viewing the picture while she was out at her office, she would consider it only on one condition – that William Savoy approved the visitor and accompanied him throughout the visit.

In effect, therefore, ever since, with his memorable article in the *Burlington*, he had proclaimed the painting to be by Tintoretto, it was Savoy who decided who in the international art world was to have the privilege of seeing the 'Venus with the Fan'. The painting had been reproduced in books and in a few periodicals, but photographs, the supply controlled nominally by Mrs Kent, in practice by Savoy, were always hard to come by. And no scholar, since the Burlington House show, saw the actual painting unless he was a personal friend of Savoy or a personage so august that Savoy wished to do him a favour.

He felt happier after dinner and allowed other members to talk to him, though not for long at a time. In this way, with the help of coffee and cigarettes and the evening papers, he passed a not disagreeable hour or so, and then decided to economise by going home by bus. The slope of St. James's Street had become noticeably steeper, and longer, of late years, and this evening there was a gusty north wind blowing down from Piccadilly. It was too early for the theatres to be unloosing their audiences and there were plenty of taxi-cabs about but valiantly he resisted the temptation and, with his heart pounding a little, he reached Piccadilly and, as a reward for his virtue, found a No. 9 bus, held up by the Arlington Street traffic lights. He climbed gladly aboard and a couple of West Indians made room for him on the bench seat next to the

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conductor's platform. ~~There~~ There had been a time when, on such an occasion, he would ~~have~~ started a kindly and amusing conversation with these ~~young~~ strangers in London, but he was too tired now and, perhaps, too old.

When he walked into the Mews, he was quite unable to appreciate, as normally he never failed to do, its charming pretence of being a corner of France, Southern France, the Riviera to be exact, transplanted to London. On all the houses the brickwork was limewashed pink or green or lemon-yellow, the doors were painted in even more vivid colours, and there were window-boxes, and a couple of potted palm trees. Although it looked gayest in summer sunshine, after dark, by the light cast from a few dim bracket lamps, the Mews undoubtedly was at its most romantic. Now Savoy took it all for granted, let himself in and, knowing there was no one else in the place, immediately ~~locked~~ bolted the front door behind him, snapped the lock to the fixed position, and put up the chain.

He went upstairs and straight to the bedroom, for he had already decided to postpone his hot bath until the morning. The bus journey had exhausted him and he wished he had not been so austere and denied himself a brandy with his coffee at the club. He could get one now, but only by going down the stairs and coming up again, which would wear him out. Undressing as fast as he could beside the gas fire, he felt that he was as lonely as well as an elderly gentleman, and tried to cheer himself, using a routine familiar to his mind, by reviewing the major achievements of his career.

He had done, and no one could deny it, valuable services to art and to scholarship. It was true that, compared with

some he could mention, and of whom it was pardonable to be jealous in the privacy of his own meditations, he was not and never had been a rich man, so that his knowledge and his expertise had been used not in amassing a collection but in general scholarship and in advising galleries, museums and students. Had he been rich, he – and not certain others who were always getting their names into the papers, and even recently getting into the Honours Lists as well – would have been in the forefront of the Seicento revival. Then he would have been the one to possess the important, emotionally stimulating Guido Renis, Domenichinos and Luca Giordanos, big, authentic canvases of flagellations, martyrdoms and pagan celebrations, young St Sebastian alongside Phoebus Apollo, and a dozen other interesting contrapuntal pairings he could think of.

Because his income was hardly sufficient to keep him fed and clothed and with an inadequate roof over his head, all he was able to show, in his modest little home, for a lifetime of devotion to the arts was an assembly, out of the ordinary and in its way distinguished, of small objects but none of them, he was always prepared to admit, what either a critic or a dealer would call 'important'. The small size of the house dictated the size of the rooms and the height of the walls, so that what he possessed were small canvases and a few panels, by minor masters, disciples, followers and a few which might, in fact, be studio copies. What gave unity to a collection which at first sight might seem heterogeneous – for he had Roman terracotta figurines and caricature bronzes from late nineteenth century Paris – was something he did not feel disposed to

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avow in public; the dominating theme was the young male figure, nude or semi nude. It was not blatantly emphasised; depictions of women and of children were included but they were always subordinate.

The theme of youthful male nudity had mattered more to him in the past than it did now. In solitude, he confessed to himself that he was growing old. He spent a deal of time nowadays thinking and talking about the past and resting on his art historical laurels. It was ironic, but not enjoyably ironic, that his greatest achievement in scholarship should have been the discovery of an authentic Tintoretto beneath a false Titian, for he had a strong distaste for most of the Venetian artists. In Venice, it seemed to him, the painters, Giorgione, Titian, Palma, Vecchio, Palma Giovane, Tintoretto, Veronese, Tiepolo, the whole lot of them, grossly rejoiced in carnal superabundance, making their women ~~not~~ merely female but as rounded and plumped out as – his tired mind paused, unable to find a similitude, until savagely masochistic, it compared the large women of Venetian art to his own adipose and flabby body.

Bleak with self-disgust, he went to bed, put out the bedside lamp and began to fight his insomniac tendency, deciding to allow himself till one o'clock in the morning before taking a sleeping pill.

He guessed wrong.

When he awoke, it was broad daylight and he felt almost well which showed that it paid to do without brandy and to use public transport and to walk reasonable distances. He also felt happy for he found himself in the midst of a dream that presently became a daydream. He dreamed that he had persuaded Eleanor Kent to agree to sell the 'Venus

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with the Fan'. This was an unselfish action because it meant that he surrendered his right of guardianship over the picture, but it also meant that his guardianship came to a glorious, dramatic and gratifying conclusion: he took charge of all the preliminary negotiations with Sotheby's and Christie's.

Later, when the secret was out, he figured as the owner's representative. This was at a time, extended over several delirious months, when all over the world the 'Venus with the Fan' was the prime subject of conversation among art experts, art historians, art critics, trustees and directors of museums and public galleries, cabinet ministers and the controllers of foundations to perpetuate the names of Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan and a dozen others, as well as millionaires still alive and with surplus millions to spend.

The sale was destined, as every newspaper everywhere repeatedly told its readers – he saw the headlines vividly clear in his dream – to be the sale of the century. He timed it, carefully, for the autumn, the middle of October, when London's social life would be at its most brilliant, and during the months of preparation several approaches were made to him, most discreet approaches, by persons and institutions wishing to discover if the picture might not after all be sold, ahead of time, by private treaty. These people offered fantastic sums, in sterling or dollars, or gold, on top of which they were each of them ready to pay compensation to the auctioneers not only for loss of commission but for loss of publicity. It fell to William Savoy as the owner's representative (a post which, he made very clear, was an honorary one) to investigate and weigh

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these private approaches, and it was his judgment which, in the end, decided that each and all were not in the owner's interest.

The only way to determine the value of such a picture was to put it up to unrestricted auction in the greatest art market in the world, London. Gossip he ignored; rumours he contradicted. As the day of the sale drew nearer, he began to see his name, and often his photograph, in the papers almost every day; he was interviewed by the BBC and by two British commercial television companies; he underwent film interviews to be shown on cinema newsreels and on American and Australian television. It was the most delightful dream he had ever had. He became a celebrity not merely to the art world but to the general public; his name over the telephone procured him immediately a reserved table at the smartest restaurants where he entertained important guests on a lavish expense account. In his dream he gave the most earnest and protracted consideration to the problem of whether the picture should be entrusted to Christie's or to Sotheby's, postponing the decision as long as possible. It was therefore not altogether surprising that, as the dream changed itself into a daydream, he remained a little uncertain whether the setting for the great day was to be the octagonal sale room in King Street or the longer but narrower room in Bond Street.

The daydream day at last arrived, the culmination of his whole career. Four other important pictures had been gathered together and brought into the sale. They were put up first and they went for thirty-five, forty-two, fifty-eight, and seventy thousand pounds apiece. Any one

of them would have been sufficient to put an ordinary sale into the headlines. On this occasion they were no more than preliminaries. He took up his privileged position beside the rostrum when the 'Venus with the Fan', Tintoretto's supreme masterpiece, was lifted on to the dais. The bidding began at one hundred thousand pounds, the jump was never less than ten thousand; smoothly and rapidly the bidding advanced to a hundred and fifty, a hundred and eighty, two hundred thousand pounds, and then in two jumps to a quarter of a million. When it went to two hundred and eighty thousand, beating the world record price paid not long before, and also in London, for the Duke of Westminster's 'Adoration of the Magi' by Rubens, some element of puritanism, or perhaps of superstition, in William Savoy compelled him to bring the wishful daydream to an end.

He looked at his watch. The time was twelve minutes past eight. He remembered that this was the day of the week for Christie's picture sale, but the Tintoretto, *his* Tintoretto, would not be put up this Friday or any Friday, nor on any Wednesday, which was Sotheby's day for picture sales. He had been dreaming like a boy of what never would be. The Tintoretto belonged to Eleanor Kent, and despite the attempt to steal it out of her flat, for some perverse, infuriating reason she refused to sell. And he, like a fool, had advised her that the picture, because of its weight and size, was 'thief-proof', thereby confirming her in her obstinate irrationality.

The rapturous dream was still vivid in memory and, to that extent, still held him under its spell. It was as if he had been given a prophetic glimpse into a future which,

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if he exerted himself and held to what must surely now be his firm purpose, might yet come true. If he procrastinated, he might lose the unfamiliar decisiveness left over from the dream – and for all he knew, Eleanor Kent might leave her flat within the next few minutes to start her morning's journey to the City.

How sad, he thought, for a woman, in other ways as sensible as a woman could be, to have to go out and earn her daily bread among mercantile people in sordid surroundings when all she had to do was to overcome a prejudice, sell a picture, and she would have enough money to live on in comfort for the rest of her life! If she sold the 'Venus' she would be far richer than he was, and he admired himself for his altruism as he reached for the telephone at his bedside.

'Eleanor?'

'Who is it?'

She ought to have recognised his voice.

He told her, impatiently, his name and then, with a change of tone, asked: 'Are you all right?'

'Why shouldn't I be?'

'I was worried,' he explained. 'After last night. Did you have any more trouble?'

He had, as he hoped, taken her by surprise.

'But you yourself said——'

He paused to take a breath and then anxiety making his voice quite harsh, he explained: 'I know. And I've been worrying about it ever since. I've hardly slept a wink.'

She was not slow to draw an inference, and it was the correct one, the one he wished her to draw. Unfortunately

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her mind was almost too quick for him, for she turned the inference into an awkward question.

'Well, if the picture isn't safe, what am I supposed to do about it? Put it in a strong room?'

He reminded her that, as he had told her before, it was useless to try to store pictures, like jewellery or gold or bonds; they deteriorated without light and air.

'I must talk to you,' he said earnestly. 'This week-end. The situation is really serious.'

He asked her to lunch with him. It would not be so expensive, not nearly so expensive as entertaining a man, and the afterglow of his dream told him that he was playing for high stakes.

'Have you written to the insurance company?'

'Not yet.'

'Well, you must.'

He understood exactly how she felt. One had to keep paying away these sums every year, paying them into vast organisations which not only erected horrible blocks of offices all over the place but used their huge incomes in the investment market, driving up prices and keeping out private persons, like himself, from many a useful little buy which might have turned out a capital gain. One paid insurance reluctantly, grudgingly, on the off chance that a disaster might occur, but so long as the disaster failed to happen the money undoubtedly was thrown away.

If Eleanor felt as strongly as he did, as every thinking person did, about insurance payments, she ought to be glad to be relieved of the burden of owning the 'Venus'.

'The trouble with your problem,' he said, 'is - it's unique.'

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‘Do you mean that?’

‘Well, I don’t know of anyone else anywhere in a similar situation. It’s just impossible to make a comparison.’

The suggestion that she was apart from the rest of humanity served both to frighten her a little and to flatter her, but so indirectly that she would hardly be aware of it. He had taken the first small step towards making his dream come true and he felt pleased with himself, as well as hopeful, as he replaced the telephone on its cradle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Visit of Inspection

On the day that James Hogan came to view the 'Venus with the Fan', Eleanor Kent ought to have been present to receive him. He came in the afternoon because he wished to examine the picture by daylight, and she chose a Saturday because she disliked taking time off from her work. Yet when he arrived there was only Miss Henderson to open the door to him and only Barbara to shake his hand and bid him welcome.

Eleanor learned this when she reached the flat ten minutes later. She hurried straight to the drawing-room to apologise. Immediately she perceived that both Barbara and the man who had come at her request were ill at ease with each other. Barbara, of course, was still too young, too self-conscious, to cope well with a social emergency, and Hogan – who was rather older than she had expected him to be – for all his composure and assurance clearly lacked polish and, perhaps refinement. He was already examining the picture and using quite a large magnifying glass for the purpose.

She herself could think of nothing more interesting to say than: 'I feel quite guilty, for the fact of the matter is, I just forgot the time.'

She tried to make a mental note to wonder, later on, when

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she was alone, why she should have been moved to such candour.

Barbara became aware of her and gave her a smile which was also a discreet signal not to interrupt the ceremony of artistic appraisal. James Hogan seemed to notice nothing, but suddenly he lowered the magnifying glass, turned and thanked her: 'It was kind of you, Mrs Kent, to keep so quiet. I was trying to think.'

'Oh,' she said lightly, 'to me it looked as though you were searching for a signature.'

'I was.'

'There isn't one.'

'Yes,' he admitted, 'but I had to see for myself. Just occasionally, even on very well known pictures, a signature or a date gets overlooked.'

'So you always make sure? On principle?'

'In this case I have a reason. And that's what I was thinking about when you came in - whether or not it is a sound reason.'

She sat, so that he could sit also if he wished, but he stayed on his feet, talking to her but looking every now and then at the picture.

'You can't stop there,' she objected. 'You must tell us what the reason is.'

He began to shake his head and Barbara intervened quickly.

'You don't understand, mother. Writing about art isn't a matter of making snap judgments.'

The visitor could not guess that this was a daughter's way of making an indirect and malicious reference to her mother's means of earning a living, for Barbara's con-

ception of business was of a vast, vulgar confusion of orders and counter-orders shouted into telephones. If the child had expected approval from James Hogan, she did not receive it. Perhaps his sympathy went to his own generation when a youngster was hurtful?

'Snap judgments?' he said. 'That's not the trouble with most art historians. We do everything slowly and we're all moral cowards.'

'Not you, Mr Hogan!' Barbara declared staunchly, opening her eyes wide as she looked full into his eyes.

Eleanor Kent was amused, but not surprised, to observe his embarrassment. Girls nowadays were shameless. Finesse had passed out of use in favour of the direct attack on the masculine senses even in public, even in front of one's parents. She hoped that James Hogan was sufficiently alert to realise she was a child in a young woman's body, imitating her contemporaries without understanding, and certainly without intending to provoke an amorous response.

After a moment he said, quite calmly: 'I'm just as scared of making a bad mistake as anyone else. In the art historical world mistakes are never forgotten and never forgiven. Each of us knows that all the others are always watching. That's what slows down the pace.'

Incautiously he turned towards the picture and found himself again staring, from a distance of only two feet or so, into Barbara's eyes which immediately opened again, suffusing with dark, mysterious and emotional brilliance, as she affirmed: 'I refuse to believe that you're a coward.'

Although the presence of her mother did not seem to incommode Barbara, James Hogan found it an embarrass-

ment. He had his head screwed on the right way, however, and needed only a moment to discover how to deal with the girl.

'I will try,' he said, making his face expressionless, 'to live up to your good opinion, Miss Kent.'

He took another long look at the picture, and Eleanor realised that not for some time, except when she thought it might have been stolen, and when she thought it might have been damaged, had she given it more than a casual glance. Because she had other interests and did not apply her mind steadily to any branch of art, and yet had been often in the company of experts, she was afraid to form opinions, still less to utter them. She had been twice to Venice and seen the great religious series of Tintoretto's in the Scuola di San Rocco. She was clear in her own mind that, whether or not it was either a highbrow or a low-brow popular opinion, for her Tintoretto was a more impressive painter than Titian, Veronese, Tiepolo or any other Venetian. Yet he puzzled her. San Rocco had given her one of the most intense emotional experiences of her life, and she found it almost impossible to believe that the man who painted the Annunciation, the Holy Family Resting, the Temptation in the Wilderness, the Last Supper and the great Crucifixion, which had a wall to itself at San Rocco, was the same man who had painted the coolly voluptuous Venus which hung in her own drawing-room.

It was, she supposed, the sort of picture men liked because they liked women – because they liked women as females, as bodies to look at and touch and sleep with. Venus was neither prone nor seated; her back was turned

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towards the viewer, whoever the viewer might be, but incompletely, so that her full breasts were in profile. She was seen full length couched on a grassy bank with one arm extended along the upper rim of hip and thighs. In her other hand, she held the fan, which was not a folding fan but the simpler sixteenth century version, a small rectangle of silk fastened to an ivory stick. She was nude, and the indications of strong, hot sunshine, as well as the use of the fan, no doubt helped to make the nakedness of her pale flesh more plausible to the eye.

She occupied most of the picture space, a long, broad diagonal – for there was no twentieth century skimpiness about her – from top right to bottom left. She showed herself under a flowering bush which closed in, with its dark greens, the side of the picture where her head and shoulders dominated the foreground; around her bright flowers sprang up among the grasses, and in the distance, to the left, there stretched a landscape of blue hills merging into blue sky. It was there, so distant that he could easily be overlooked, that Mars, with his burnished helmet and cuirass, his sword and his crimson cloak, appeared.

What gave the picture its charm, in Eleanor Kent's opinion, was the addition of the three tiny figures in the foreground. Three was the right number; more would have been too many. None was a Cupid, who would probably have been shown as an older boy. The *bambini* were two- or three-year-olds. One played with the long, dark, disordered hair of Venus; another, who stood upright, forming a background to the hand with the fan, had taken temporary possession of the goddess's hand-mirror, a mirror of polished silver set in an ornate silver

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frame which he held a little above, as well as in front of, his face, tilting his head back to observe his own image the better. The third boy, at the far left of the picture, turned his back on Venus and on all spectators while he crouched in front of a tree stump with a book, presumably a book of verses, held open in front of him, but tilted away, so that one readily perceived that he had no idea what reading meant.

Hogan continued to stare at the picture. She wondered what interested him most, the *bambini*, the brushwork, the composition, or was he, for all his expertise, just the average sensual man responding to a lush nude? Whatever the answer to these questions, which she could never put to him, he undoubtedly liked the picture. He liked it more than she did. He appreciated it, with a quiet relish, and she inclined to think that he must be one of those men that other men call 'womanisers'. It wasn't right, it wasn't healthy, it wasn't sane to keep on staring at a picture so long.

'But, Mr Hogan, didn't you see it at Burlington House in 1950?'

'Yes, but I got distracted by other pictures then. I was hoping you would have lent it for the winter show this year.'

He had made a statement, but there was a question implied in it, a question she was unwilling to answer. Long before the 'Italian Art and Britain' exhibition was publicly announced, Willie Savoy had come and told her that the 'Venus' was on the list of requirements. There might be a difficulty in that the picture had no provenance worth mentioning. It had been overpainted and turned into a

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pseudo-Titian in Italy sometime in the eighteenth century. How and when it reached England nobody could say. Its recorded history began in 1942 when Claude Kent bought it at an unimportant auction sale.

Willie gave her to understand that there were divided counsels among those organising the preliminaries of the Exhibition, some wanting the picture to be shown in a room devoted only to recent purchases, while others held that, on its merits, it should hang with other Venetian pictures, preferably of the same century, the sixteenth. He himself thought it would detract from the picture's rareness to have it exhibited twice in a single decade. In the end, he talked her into giving him verbal authority to decline an invitation she never received direct. Having allowed herself to be guided by Willie, she could not now, to a stranger, complain or criticise. She did not even feel free to mention the name of Savoy, for it is impossible to be too circumspect in speaking of one art historian to another: if you put the wrong intonation into your voice you yourself may be silently condemned.

It was at this moment that the housekeeper came in and announced: 'Mr Savoy is asking to see you.'

CHAPTER SIX

Encounter in a Drawing-Room

William Savoy entered the drawing-room in a state of innocence and laudable satisfaction with the world and with himself. He had just spent, after luncheon, nearly an hour in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, verifying a reference for an article he was preparing for the *Paris Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and when he came out into the mellowing sunshine of a March afternoon he remembered that he was only a few minutes walk from Queen's Gate.

All that morning his mind had been yielding ground at an increasing pace to the proposition he intended to put before Eleanor Kent, and at the same time deciding that the proposition would have a much higher chance of success if he took her unawares. The visit to the library provided an unassailable excuse for not using the telephone first, and he entered the Queen's Gate flat with several sentences of explanation, thoroughly rehearsed, at the tip of his tongue.

His intention was stultified as soon as he reached the doorway, and it was he, not his hostess, who was taken by surprise. Another art historian was already in the drawing-room.

He had uncovered a plot.

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So far as his imagination would allow such an exercise, he felt like a husband in an old story who learns that his trusted wife has been making him a cuckold.

How long had it been going on? How many of his friends knew and had been secretly laughing at him?

As soon as she saw the look on his face, Eleanor knew that, by chance or by miscalculation, she had brought about a potential 'scene'. Willie's complexion was always pale; at sight of James Hogan, his face became blanched to such a degree that tinges of green and purple showed round the mouth, where his thick, soft, quivering lips pouted with displeasure. She would hardly have been surprised to see tears spill over the edges of his eyelashes. She would have liked to comfort him, to tell him explicitly that no insult had been intended, that she was merely, out of prudence, taking a second opinion. To say anything of the kind would have been unthinkable. She took a quick glance at Hogan and saw him accepting Willie's scowl with a stiff, proud stare.

'Now let me see,' she heard herself exclaiming. 'Do you two know each other?'

Poor Willie was not yet in control of himself. He gulped, visibly but unsuccessfully, for words which would not come.

'We *have* met,' said Hogan.

She would never have asked him to the flat had she suspected that they were enemies. Hogan, who must have known of Willie's special relationship to the picture, ought to have refused to come. In a sense, however, the horrid situation was due to Barbara. She had caused great difficulties a few years ago, when she was cultivating obsessional

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enthusiasms for first the poems and then the personality of Mr T. S. Eliot, who ignored her, and later for the history mistress at her school who ought to have had more sense than to tolerate her behaviour. It was a stage of development, a symptom of adolescence, to lavish a partly intellectual, partly emotional loyalty on some selected person – the sex seemed neither here nor there – whose greater age and comparative eminence in the world could be magnified to resemble the attributes of a demi-god. Barbara might have made a worse choice than James Hogan, but it was unfortunate that he should be an art historian, and an art historian inquisitive about the ‘Venus with the Fan’, and third, an art historian who obviously was *persona non grata* with Willie Savoy.

Persecuted, a victim, a man unjustly affronted, William Savoy, to whom civilisation was largely a complex of social niceties, did not overlook his obligations as a visitor. He spared two seconds of his attention for Barbara, his hostess’s daughter, giving her a stunted bow, which recognised her presence but recognised it, wrongly, as irrelevant. He consented then to sit in his favourite arm-chair. He listened, without any appearance of listening, while Miss Henderson declared that tea was ready if they were ready for it.

‘Oh please,’ James Hogan said, using the idiom of middle-class drawing-room politeness as fluently as though he had been born and bred to it, ‘not for me. I must be going.’

‘Don’t,’ said Barbara, speaking urgently as though she were alone with someone she knew much more intimately than she could possibly know Hogan. ‘I’d like you to stay.’

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Eleanor Kent, astonished, interpreted this as an act of defiance against poor Willie, whom she remembered, Barbara had lately taken to regarding as out of date.

Hogan did not yield to the girl's entreaty but did not specifically refuse. He remained on his feet, and because he did so, no doubt, Barbara also continued to stand. Willie Savoy, from his armchair, gave the pair of them an inquisitorial look, and Eleanor Kent noticed it and wondered about it.

On a physically lower level, Willie was perhaps at some moral disadvantage, but in his most pompous and patronising manner he enquired: 'And what are you doing here, may I ask?'

Hogan turned away as he answered, quietly insolent: 'I was looking at this picture, Savoy. I believe you had something to do with it at one time, hadn't you?'

It was like watching a boxer on television, under the bright lights, receive a hard punch in the stomach. Willie looked incredulous, indignant but quite helpless. It was a moment at which it would be a referee's duty to intervene because one of the two combatants, although still on his feet, was unable to defend himself. But this was not a boxing match and there was no referee; there were also no tiresome regulations to prohibit her from rushing to Willie's rescue.

'It was Mr Savoy,' she said, 'who advised me to have it cleaned and so was able to settle the question of who painted it. My husband found the picture and bought it, but that was wartime, and he died soon after - before he could put in any real work on it.'

How smoothly the legend she had created clung round

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the facts, and around Claude's reputation, affording the most decorous and plausible concealment!

A few more brief statements were needed to complete the operation of rescuing Willie's self-esteem.

'I have only an amateur's knowledge of art,' she said with what she knew, at the moment of speaking, to be a becoming feminine modesty, 'and I found myself left with a picture on which a great deal of critical and technical work had still to be done. Mr Savoy did it for me – as a friend, as a friend of my husband's. He is the second discoverer of the picture. He is the one who published it.'

James Hogan looked contrite, but it was to her that he spoke, not to Willie.

'Mr Savoy may find it hard to believe, but until just now I knew almost nothing of what you have told me.'

'But everybody knows,' Willie protested.

At last Hogan turned and looked at him.

'I didn't,' he said.

'Extraordinary!'

'I don't think so,' Hogan retorted, politely enough. 'There was no special reason why I should take any particular interest in this picture – until recently.'

Whatever Hogan was alluding to, Eleanor had no doubt it was grossly misinterpreted, for at the concluding phrase 'until recently', Willie opened his mouth, rounded his eyes, and then flickered a glance between Hogan and Barbara: after this, he suddenly put on an absurdly roguish expression.

Eleanor would have liked to remind him that, as Barbara's mother, she would know if anything was going on between Hogan and the girl and could assure him that

nothing was. The next moment she realised that this wishful thought carried its own warning within itself.

'Mr Hogan,' she said, pleasantly she hoped but she watched him closely to see the effect, 'have I been remiss? Ought I to have asked – you see, I don't know if there is a Mrs Hogan?'

He stared straight back at her and his eyes disclosed nothing as he replied: 'Not now.'

It was an answer which might mean anything: it might mean that he was divorced or that he had divorced his wife, or that they were no longer living together or——

'Mother,' cried Barbara, her voice harsh with condemnation, 'how could you! Mr Hogan's wife is dead.'

Her own thoughts took up the condemnation, arraighing her for an unforgivable clumsiness. She felt so guilty that there was no delay in bringing forward the rider, the jury's recommendation to mercy, which everybody privately added at the end of every bout of self-inculpation – the dreadful deed was not by any means all her fault. Willie Savoy, for example (who, at the moment, was looking even smugger than he usually did) ought to take a lot of the blame: he had first got hold of the ridiculous idea that there was something between Barbara and Hogan, and had passed the idea to her, reminding her that she was a mother, with a mother's responsibilities. Willie, indeed, was the original cause of all the trouble, bursting in upon her, without a word of warning, taking offence because another man dared to look at a picture he considered – and really it was time he was put in his place about it! – to be virtually his private property.

'Oh dear!' she said. 'I'm so sorry.'

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'It was a long time ago,' Hogan said. 'Twelve years.'

He could not be persuaded to remain. She could hardly blame him for that.

'I'll see you out.'

'No,' said Barbara, 'I will. I have to go down the road anyway.'

Whatever for? It was a question which at the moment could not be spoken.

Hogan held out his hand and thanked her for allowing him to see the Tintoretto. 'That is,' he added, 'if it *is* by Tintoretto.'

Now, in her own person, she went through the experience of a boxer who has his faculties paralysed by a single blow – a foul blow. She would have let Hogan get away with it and walk out of the room, and out of the flat, but Willie Savoy, realising it was his turn to come to the rescue, spoke up for her. Spreading his long white fingers over the upholstered arms of his chair, he forced himself unsteadily to his feet and demanded: 'What do you mean by that?'

'I was speaking to Mrs Kent.'

'But in my presence,' retorted Willie. 'And no one, no one with the slightest pretension to any special knowledge of Venetian Cinquecento painting, has ever doubted that this picture' – he pointed dramatically to the wall – 'is by Tintoretto.'

'Well,' said Hogan, equably, 'maybe no one has looked at it the right way. And I really must go and the matter is of no interest to Mrs Kent.'

'Oh yes, it is,' she said. 'Are you suggesting the picture is a Titian after all?'

He shook his head.

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'I don't know who painted it. Not for sure. I have a pretty shrewd idea, but I can't prove I'm right. Not yet.'

'Who,' Willie Savoy demanded, ponderously sarcastic, 'do you propose?'

Again Hogan shook his head.

'It's better for me to say nothing until I'm ready to argue a case. I'm sorry if I upset you, Savoy, but be reasonable. Other people are entitled to an opinion, you know.'

'Based on what?'

'Instinct,' Hogan replied. 'Your Tintoretto attribution is not in itself a bad one. It's a possibility. But you have no solid evidence for it. You just *feel* it's a Tintoretto. Well, I see why you feel like that, but to me it lacks the Tintoretto touch. I'm not sure it's wholly Venetian.'

'My dear young man,' said Willie, 'everybody except you knows that I place the 'Venus' very early in Tintoretto's long career, when he was already a master of his craft but had not yet fully evolved an individual style of his own.'

Willie swung round to look at the picture from one side, holding up a big, agitated hand with the expository fore-finger protruding.

'One can trace several influences in this composition, but the authorship is not to be disputed. Heavens, man, look at the flesh! Look at the flesh!'

'I have,' said Hogan. 'And since you ask me, I tell you the flesh tones are just a little too low pitched to be by Tintoretto.'

Willie opened and closed his mouth several times like a flabbergasted fish.

'Too low in tone?' he exclaimed. 'Didn't you go to

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Burlington House this year? And didn't you notice the allegorical Tintoretto?"

"The one they call "Angelica and the Hermit"? Well, you don't think all of that is from Tintoretto's own hand surely? But even so, the flesh is not so pale as in this one."

Hogan abruptly changed his manner as he turned to her and said: "I do beg your pardon, Mrs Kent. You must not pay any attention to disputatious people like us. It's one of our occupational diseases not to be able to see the wood for the trees. Your picture is a fine work of art, a masterpiece, whoever proves to have painted it."

What he said might be a truism, but it showed, she thought, that he possessed a sense of proportion and that he meant no harm. It was complimentary not only to the picture but to her. She was not displeased.

Willie Savoy, however, glared at Hogan's back as Hogan held the door open for Barbara, and he went on glaring when there was only the closed door to glare at.

"Monstrous behaviour!" he said. "Monstrous!"

She sat down to pour the tea. There was no need to ask Willie's preferences: they never varied: no sugar, no milk, and precisely two drops of lemon juice.

"The man is a barbarian," he declared. "Eleanor, you can't allow it. You simply can't allow it."

"It's all over now," she said, uncovering the crumpets so that Willie could help himself.

"I was referring," he explained, "to Barbara's infatuation for that man."

"Willie, you're imagining things. Barbara always has to have someone to look up to. That's the stage she 'sat'.

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'Nobody,' Willie told her, 'could look up to Hogan! She must be in love with him.'

'Nonsense! She wants to make herself a pupil, a disciple. She sees him as a Great Mind – by that she means a mind with more knowledge and experience than her own.'

Willie sniffed.

'If she merely wanted to be a disciple, there are plenty of other people about with far better qualifications than Hogan.'

'Her tastes are her own,' Eleanor said, 'and she has every right to them. But I'm sure that there's nothing personal in her attitude to Mr Hogan. Nothing personal at all.'

While she spoke she wondered if what she was saying were true. Willie might have been able to read what was going on at the back of her mind.

'Then why,' he demanded, 'is she not here? Is it usual for a grown man – and he must be twice her age – to be escorted by a *jeune fille* to the end of the street or the nearest Underground station or wherever they've gone. A café, I dare say. Or an even worse place. Oh yes, Eleanor, there are plenty of places like that and not so far from here.'

'You're exaggerating. Anyhow, she'll be back any minute. Then you can ask her yourself where she has been and why.'

'Try it,' she thought, 'and get your face slapped!'

Aloud she said: 'I was interested in what Mr Hogan said as he was going. I mean about the picture being just as good whoever painted it——'

Willie, swallowing the last of the last crumpet, was

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unable to speak but he interrupted her with a gesture of protest.

'But why not?' she asked; 'Would it make very much difference if—just suppose, Willie, for the sake of argument—Mr Hogan, or you, or anyone were able to prove that it's not by Tintoretto but by someone else? That wouldn't alter anything about the picture itself, would it?'

'You must realise,' Willie said momentarily, 'that the authenticity of pictures does not depend entirely on signatures and dates and so on. Of course they're a help. It's quite a little science of its own, the interpretation of signatures.'

'Now I remember,' she cried. 'When I came in, Mr Hogan had his magnifying glass out—'

'Insolence!' cried Willie. 'Damnable insolence! No word to me and not even asking *your* permission!'

'He was looking for a signature along the bottom part of the picture, you know—where pictures are usually signed. But he said he hardly expected to find one.'

Willie emitted a burst of self-conscious laughter.

'A signature!' he exclaimed. 'A signature? The fellow's so ignorant he doesn't realise that Tintoretto hardly ever signed a picture.'

'But,' Eleanor said gently, 'what he was looking for must have been the signature of some other painter.'

Willie laughed again, even more derisively.

'Assuming,' he said, speaking very fast, 'merely for the sake of argument that there could conceivably be another signature, does he really think that I would have left it for him to discover? What arrogance! Why, I was familiar with most of the world's masterpieces, and had begun to

make a stir in the art world, I had even stayed for a fortnight with B.B., before that fellow had left school – that is, if he ever went to school.’

B.B. she knew was Bernard Berenson, recently dead at a great age.

Exactly how old, she wondered, was James Hogan? The same age as herself? Or a little younger? Just possibly, a year or so older?

To her he seemed a dangerous man. He was dangerous to her peace of mind. He was dangerous to her future and to her daughter’s future, for if he could back his theory, whatever it was, with sound evidence, and the picture turned out to be not a Tintoretto after all, then she had been wasting money for years on excessive insurance.

Barbara had not yet returned. The tea was going cold in the pot. Meanwhile Willie had never stopped talking, and only gradually did Eleanor Kent begin to understand that he was reporting, with regret, on enquiries he had made on her behalf but without her knowledge or consent.

‘Your name was not mentioned. Nor was the picture. I put a hypothetical case.’

Willie, it appeared, had conceived the idea that, as she was unwilling to make a present of the picture to the National Gallery, the National Gallery might, after due deliberation, buy it from her.

‘You wouldn’t get as much as if you sold at Sotheby’s or Christie’s,’ he said. ‘But you’d get a good price.’

‘How much?’

‘It’s only a guess, and my own guess, but perhaps £120,000. And Barbara would in due course inherit the whole of that.’

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It was selfish, inconsiderate, and shameless of Barbara to stay out so long. The less the girl saw of James Hogan in the future, the better.

Aloud, Eleanor required Willie Savoy to explain himself further.

'The Government pays less than the full value, but as compensation it is prepared to forego estate duty – what's commonly called death duty.'

Startled, indeed, horrified, she exclaimed: 'I'm not going to die yet.'

Winsome Willie and the Government – he hinted that he had contrived two separate conferences, one with a trustee of the National Gallery, the other with a high official of the Treasury – seemed to her to outrage the decencies when they presumed to plan the clearing up of her estate after her death. She was not old yet. She was only ~~just~~ forty. She had, if the truth were known, not yet begun to live as she wanted to live.

Willie then had the cheek to tell her that his enquiries had come to nothing. Only the month before, an arrangement had been made for the purchase of Rembrandt's 'Portrait of a Man on Horseback' for the National Gallery. Exactly how much the owner received was not known, but the Government alone had put up £128,000. After such a heavy disbursement, the Treasury, Willie reported, could not be expected to make another for several years.

'Why tell me about this sort of thing,' she said sharply, 'if it doesn't apply to my picture?'

Willie, looking like a red-haired Buddha, replied: 'If one door is locked, there's another still open.'

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‘For heaven’s sake, Willie, talk plain English. Which other door do you mean?’

‘The door to the saleroom,’ he said.

It did not take him very long to persuade her, for by that time she wanted to be persuaded. It seemed to her that in the circumstances, Claude Kent himself, were he alive and not a fading memory in her occasional thoughts, could hardly have reproached her.

‘I’ll leave the arrangements to you,’ she said.

Before he went, Willie made her promise not to speak to any one about the negotiations he would soon be undertaking.

‘I’ll let you know when the first public announcement is going to be made. Till then, not a word, not even to Barbara.’

He spoke only just in time, for a moment later Barbara appeared. She had a gramophone record, done up in one of the new pictorial sleeves, under her arm.

‘I’m sorry I missed tea,’ she said. ‘I just had to hear this twice before I decided to buy.’

It might be true or it might be a trumped-up excuse. Eleanor knew she would never dare to ask. Willie refused to wait to see what the record was. He had lost interest in his own insinuations about Barbara and James Hogan. All he cared about was the picture and the secret between him and its owner – the secret of when and where it was to be sold.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rebuff

The life that James Hogan led would have seemed to many people lonely and austere. It did not seem so to him. He had a flat, in St John's Wood, which he made into a place of privacy: there was sufficient wall space in it to hang the most pictorial of his collection of drawings. He earned enough to keep himself in what he thought of as comfort and to save a few hundred pounds a year. His friends were quite numerous, and a few were close friends; if none had his full intimacy that was because he was the kind of man whose nature is to open his mind to only one person, a woman. That woman had been Hogan's wife. She had died while they were both young, before they had a baby, before he discovered exactly what he wanted to do with his talents. He had not forgotten, but he had allowed memories to recede and lose definition. He had been very happy for a few years. He did not expect to be so happy again.

An American had once told him that he was well adjusted, perhaps over-adjusted, to the role of widower. He had learned during the past ten or twelve years to find his principal interest and satisfaction in two activities, the specialised pleasure of his eyes and the exercise of his wits on problems of art scholarship. Finding out who did

what and when and how – the why was usually too large and loose a problem to be solved – about old pictures and drawings yielded him the sort of slow, complicated, almost mathematically complete contentment which, he supposed, other people got from chess, crossword puzzles and detective stories. He thought his own pastime intellectually superior to the others. The only drawback was that no correct answer could be guaranteed, and sometimes no plausible answer at all could be found.

His position among scholars, historians and critics of art was, if not anomalous, somewhat odd. He had attained it by an unusual approach – through journalism. In 1939 he was to have gone to Oxford, from a grammar school, with a scholarship in modern history. Instead, he went into the Army as a private soldier. He came out six years later with a Military Cross, three campaign ribbons and considerable impatience. Rather than spend two years at Oxford on a 'shortened course' for a degree, he took a post, offered him by the father of an army friend, in the administrative offices of a newspaper publishing firm in Yorkshire. From that, and against advice, he transferred himself to the editorial staff of one of the papers, and, contriving to be both fluent and accurate, he succeeded so well that presently he was invited to join the staff of a national newspaper, starting as a 'rewriteman'.

It was then that he married, and then that, for the first time in his life, he was able to attend, during his free mornings, the London salerooms, and presently (it was almost the last time at which art prices were still low) to buy a few old drawings and form the nucleus of a small collection. Within two years of the wedding his wife died,

of an infection the doctors (it was honest of them to admit it) could not put a name to or account for. He had no wish to be consoled or distracted from his grief. Grief, when the funeral was over, and his mother and his wife's father and mother, and a lot of relations, had gone back to the North, was all he had left, except his drawings.

He established a routine of being left alone as often as possible with his grief and his drawings. For the *Clarion* he worked hard, and, as a sideline, he began to report those of the London auction sales which were judged to have 'news value'. At week-ends he applied himself to the task of reading and looking at drawings and reproductions of drawings, concentrating on the Italian Mannerists to start with, but extending presently to the Flemish, Dutch and German Mannerists, as well as the School of Fontainebleau. Why their work, with its elegant protractions of the human body and its blend of charm and eroticism, appealed to him so strongly he did not know until a man who claimed to be a psychologist summed it up for him in the one word 'phallic'. He laughed and did not argue back.

Every summer, after the death of his wife, he spent his annual holiday abroad, almost always in Italy, and he spent it visiting galleries, museums and churches. The time came when the art critic of the *Daily Reformer* married money, and, some said, married for money. Not surprisingly, he decided to retire, and the editor of the *Reformer*, looking around for a replacement, sounded over a luncheon an eminent architect and a collector of pictures: they told him that Hogan, the second string of the *Clarion*, although personally not known to them, was highly thought of.

To every other name the editor mentioned objections were raised, and about several damaging anecdotes were told, so that by a process of elimination the luncheon ended with the editor, who had the advantage of knowing Hogan slightly, agreeing with his two informants that between them they had found the very man for the job.

Once he had obtained the appointment, James Hogan made a success of it. In the past five years he had published three books, each on a separate aspect of Mannerist painting and drawing, and one of them of quite substantial length. He had also written, sometimes by invitation, a number of articles for the *Burlington Magazine*. Partly in his own right as a critic and historian, but also as the now influential critic of the *Reformer*, he was received with respect, sometimes even with liking, in the showrooms of dealers' galleries as well as in the remote offices of the directors and assistant directors of museums.

By temperament, Hogan was what critics and historians called a 'drawings man': this distinguished him from those for whom paintings were all-important and drawings apt to be regarded merely as documents preliminary to the creation of a work of art. In Hogan's view such an attitude was narrow-minded and disproportionate. It was rare to find a drawings man anywhere who did not derive pleasure from paintings also, but a drawings man worthy of the name thought of drawings as works of art in their own right. This was not true of all drawings, for some fulfilled only the function which paintings men allotted to drawings – they were so slight and so bereft of artistic intention that they were unintelligible except in reference to a specific painting. Such drawings, to Hogan, were fit only for

pedants to pore over. What he meant by a drawing was something which, in black or red chalk, in metal point on tinted or otherwise prepared paper, in charcoal or pencil or pen and ink, whether the pen were cut from a quill or a reed, had a pictorial quality.

One of his vanities was to believe that he alone fully understood and appreciated certain painters. He held Correggio to be overesteemed in comparison with Parmigianino, and he adopted a similar attitude towards Tintoretto, whom he was always ready to champion against excessive claims (which usually took the form of assumptions and implications) made on behalf of Titian. Like Correggio, Titian seemed to draw an excessive benefit from having been born earlier. Titian stood for soft living, for the silks and velvets and jewels of high life, while Tintoretto was a mystic and, even in his nudes, was austere by comparison. Titian had the bigger name, the greater prestige. He was already a Great Name when Tintoretto was starting his career, and Titian's work possessed then, and had retained ever since, the sensual appeal to the average sensual man of rich colouring combined with a soft, plump texture of paint. Tintoretto was altogether the greater artist, and if proof were needed, James Hogan would have insisted on a comparison of the two men's skill in drawing. Without draughtsmanship, he believed, all the other pictorial qualities were wasted. For this reason alone he found most of the paintings done in his own time unsatisfying, and he was apt to divide the painters of any period into sheep and goats, those who could, and those who could not, draw well. Tintoretto, with chalk or charcoal or with the brush, was always a

superb delineator and modeller, but Titian was happier with landscape than with the human body. It vexed Hogan to find the better man put into second place because of an hierarchic order established centuries ago.

When, therefore, he received an invitation to view a Tintoretto painting he had never seen, although he knew it in reproduction well enough, he was immediately interested. The visit had been ruined by the arrival of that pompous old busybody, Willie Savoy. It seemed to Hogan that the other three people would be more at ease if he left, so he got himself away as fast as he could.

What he had not reckoned on was that, when he made his excuses and left, Barbara Kent would accompany him. She put on a pale-coloured mackintosh over her brown woollen dress and black woollen stockings. To his eyes she looked odd, but she was beautiful, more beautiful, some would say, than her mother. She bore a striking resemblance to her father, whose photograph, in a silver frame, Hogan had noticed in the drawing-room. As they walked downstairs and out into the street, the girl, Hogan thought, intensified her manner, always earnest, into a solemn air of extreme respect. To meet a man whose name appeared as a by-line regularly in the press was for some people a disconcerting experience: to others it was a stimulus. Eleanor Kent's daughter, hardly more than a schoolgirl, was evidently young enough to derive the maximum enjoyment from a few minutes in the company of a minor celebrity. They had a brief misunderstanding when they reached the street: she belonged to a generation in which men walked on the inner side of the pavement.

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The girl's eyes were very bright and, as she talked, her voice, he could feel, was a little 'put on'.

He went with her as far as the corner of the Old Brompton Road, where he asked: 'Which way are you going, Miss Kent?'

She gave him no trouble at all. She was so naïve that he quickly realised she had no reason for coming out and had made up an excuse in order to divert her mother's curiosity. Now she was obliged to justify the excuse.

'Oh,' she said, 'this way. I want to go to a record shop.'

Such shops, as plentiful as coffee bars, could be found, or such was his impression, every few hundred yards. There must be one of them, if not more, near South Kensington Station. The girl, however, had indicated that stretch of the Old Brompton Road which led west towards Earls Court.

'Well then,' he said, 'I'm afraid we must say goodnight. I go the other way.'

He set off at once, glad to be alone with his own thoughts, and had almost come in sight of the Underground station when he remembered that, a few yards along the side street he had just crossed, was the shop of a picture dealer where he sometimes found, at a comparatively low price, a small picture or a drawing for his own collection. He turned back to look. At the front of the shop window, against a curtain not more than eighteen inches high, a number of framed pictures were displayed. Dutch still life and saints done in the porcelain style of Simon Vouet were not to his taste, but he was rather taken with an Andromeda chained to the rock, with the sea monster (an almost heraldic dolphin but enlarged to the size, by com-

parison with the captive maiden, of a whale) guarding the sea alongside. Even by artificial light he felt sure that the craquelure looked genuinely old. It was a strange picture but not displeasing, and he thought it probably Italian, by D'Arpino or some other late Mannerist.

Further along the window he found, put up into little gilt frames, a number of Old Master drawings. They were all worth looking at, but one compelled the return of his attention several times. He was puzzled to think why. It was a red chalk drawing, and on the whole he preferred black to red chalk. This drawing was quite small and he guessed that, probably at some time in the not remote past, a dealer had cut up a large sheet to make a number of small, saleable drawings. This one was a study, from the life perhaps, but more probably a composition study, trying out a pose to be incorporated into a larger sketch, then into cartoons, and ultimately into the finished painting. It was a study of an almost naked woman, seen reclining on a couch. She was seen from the back, but also from one side. The couch was indicated with three or four hasty lines, and the artist's attention had been concentrated on the torso, the thighs, – the calves and feet were hardly indicated at all – and the model's left arm. It was an attractive drawing, and, for some reason, a slightly puzzling one. On both counts he would have liked to add it to his collection if the price were not too high. No price was shown and, on a Saturday afternoon, the shop had closed for the week-end. He went on his way.

The following week was a very busy one. If he thought about the drawing, it was with no sense of urgency. The 'Venus with the Fan' painting, however, came to mind

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on three successive nights, when he was at the verge of sleep and had finally liberated himself from most of the day's preoccupations. He had lost a little confidence, and had begun to question his own intuition that the picture was not by Tintoretto. It seemed unlikely that the attribution could be wrong when the painting was well known and had, some years ago, it was true, been put into a Burlington House exhibition so that many competent to pass judgment must have seen it.

A critic is continually faced with the subtle problem of separating among his own impressions the subjective from the objective: Hogan knew many critics, not all art critics, who seemed unaware of the existence of this problem, but their insouciance did not absolve him from the onus of tackling it every time he was confronted with the work of a new artist or a picture more or less familiar which he was trying to see with fresh eyes. The 'Venus with the Fan' was not a typical Tintoretto even of the early period – but then nobody, not even William Savoy, had claimed that it was. It had some of the Tintoretto qualities: were they sufficient to rank as proof that it was the work of Tintoretto's hand?

James Hogan felt that he must either dismiss this subject from his mind or study it more closely. He elected to stay with it. Sometimes a problem which had been impossible to define was solved, or came nearer to solution, with the passage of time. He would have liked to look at the picture again – if possible, he would have liked to be left alone with it, in order to concentrate his mind. It would have pleased him had he been on sufficiently friendly terms with Mrs Kent, a woman he liked and, he rather thought,

respected, to be able to ring up and say: 'Look here, would you mind if I came round and had a look at your 'Venus' again, without that fellow Savoy butting in?' The fact was, however, that he hardly knew her, that he had no reason whatever to suppose that she found him at all interesting, and that it was the abominable Savoy who was on terms of friendship with her.

He did what he rarely did, except in the course of his profession – he compromised. He wrote to Mrs Kent but all he asked was a question: where could he buy a photograph of the 'Venus with the Fan'? Although he turned it also into a thank you letter, it was very short. When he sealed it and stamped it and took it out to the pillar-box, he found his thoughts turning speculatively on the personality of the woman to whom he had written. He found it hard to reconcile her obvious competence with what he had heard of her dead husband. It was sometimes said that people of strong character inevitably find gathering around them weaklings in constant need of help, and it might be that an able woman was almost impelled by destiny into marrying a fool. But, having survived a misfortunate marriage, why had Eleanor Kent taken on as her honorary adviser a bumbling old fool like William Savoy? Savoy had everything to gain from the association, for it perpetuated his one notable achievement, the discovery of a hitherto unknown Tintoretto. For the owner of the picture, however, there was no advantage apparent to Hogan in allowing Savoy to act as its artistic custodian. Mrs Kent, he concluded, must have a kind heart as well as a lively sense of gratitude.

He waited, day after day, for a reply. Nothing happened

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until a full week had elapsed, and, when an answer came, it was not from Eleanor Kent but from the objectionable adviser. It was a rebuff in two lines and in the third person, stating that Mr Savoy regretted that no photographs of the 'Venus' were at present available.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dates and Prices

The merchants by whom Eleanor Kent was employed were middlemen, buying and selling and acting as agents or distributors for manufacturing firms. It was a part of her duties to travel abroad at least twice a year to place orders and to make or modify trading arrangements with the producers of foreign fabrics. For some time she had planned a trip to Switzerland and on to Italy, which would take her as far south as Rome, a place she had never before visited except as a holidaymaker.

When her daughter got her own way, largely by sulking and weeping, and left her day school prematurely, the problem arose of how the girl was to fill in the time until October when she would 'go up' to Oxford. Eleanor suggested a temporary job: Barbara preferred to stay at home and 'read', by which she meant study. She soon began to look bored and one day Eleanor, after making a rough calculation of the extra cost, asked: 'Would you like to come with me to Zurich and Rome?'

Barbara kept her waiting no more than two seconds for an answer.

'Thanks very much, but I'd rather not.'

'Are you being snobbish? Because I'm going on a business trip, not a holiday?'

Barbara took no offence.

'I expect I *am* a bit of an intellectual snob. It was sweet of you to think of taking me, but later on I expect I'll be going off somewhere with some of my own friends, and anyhow, I dare say I'd only be in your way.'

That was true enough.

'You don't mind?'

She shook her head.

'Sure?'

Again she shook her head, and Barbara gave her a quick, hot, wet kiss. It was a schoolgirl's embrace and a schoolgirl's kiss. Each of them, Eleanor guessed, secretly felt relieved not to have the other's company in circumstances which might have put their love for each other to an intolerable strain.

Barbara, who only a year or two ago had gloried in the name of 'teenager,' would have bitterly resented it today. She would not have been any better pleased, either, to hear herself referred to as an adolescent, but adolescence was her trouble. She was in a state of psychological ferment, as little able as anyone else to understand the changes, many of them ephemeral, taking place in her own personality. No doubt she would be happier staying at home, playing records and reading poetry, and occasionally doing a little work in preparation for Oxford, than trailing round Europe with her mother. Miss Henderson would see that she got enough to eat, and had a bath once a day, and did not show herself outdoors looking too much like a slut *en route* to a fancy dress ball.

Eleanor flew direct to Milan, leaving Zürich for the return journey. The second evening she was there

Willie Savoy came through on the telephone.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

He was stupid. He could not for a whole minute understand that her anxiety was for her daughter. He had a single pre-occupation these days, and she was one of the very few people he could talk to about it. It must have been a matter of some urgency to induce him to put in an expensive overseas call from London to Milan. He told her he had not heard from or of Barbara. Why should he? No news was good news. What he wanted to talk about was——

'Well,' his voice said, conspiratorial and momentous, 'we don't need to mention it by name, do we? We understand, don't we?'

'Willie,' she said, mischievously, 'if this line is tapped, someone will be putting you on a list as a Communist agent.'

She heard him gulping for breath six hundred miles away.

At last he said: 'It's no joking matter. What's bothering me is the date.'

He had agreed with a firm of auctioneers – there were only two to choose from and he would not, over the telephone, say which – that the 'Venus with the Fan' should be put into a special sale in June. Having gone so far, he had begun to dither.

'My dear, they somehow give me the impression that they would be happier if they had more time to arouse interest. After all, it's an historic event, so to speak, and it would be a pity to rush it.'

'Willie! What are you getting at?'

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'Well, there's Ascot. And there's Derby Day, and it's almost at the end of the season then, and there's Wimbledon too.'

'But, Willie, all those are in the afternoon.'

He had thought of that.

'That's what I mean. We would get big headlines in the early afternoon papers, but by the evening, the news might be on one of the inside pages. And it would have still less chance in the dailies next morning.'

What on earth did it matter, provided the picture was sold and she got the money? She could not say so to Willie. It had become quite obvious that for him the sale of the 'Venus' was a source of most pleasurable excitement and that he was looking forward avidly to a great deal of sustained personal publicity for himself.

'What time,' she asked sharply, 'are you thinking of?'

He hesitated.

'October,' he said at last. 'I've been into it pretty thoroughly. November would do, but there's always the risk of the weather. And December - well, that might be getting too near to Christmas.'

She did not reply at once, and he became agitated, demanding, in high-pitched yelps to know if she was still at the other end of the line.

There was a lot she would gladly leave to him, but not this decision.

'Listen, Willie. I don't want to have the responsibility of this thing we must not mention one day longer than I can help. I want to go away for my holiday with a quiet mind. The sale is to be in June. Understand?'

He put up no fight at all. Perhaps he was glad to have his

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own doubts and irresolutions determined for him?

The next morning, she caught the Rome Express, rather relishing the change which awaited her from the smart, alert, rainy, electricity-and-concrete northern city to the capital, smaller but sunnier, with its ruins and its baroque churches and its languid air of having catered for foreign tourists for more than two thousand years. After the stop at Bologna she went to the restaurant car for luncheon. She knew her way about in Italy fairly well, and was aware that few Italian men, of any age, could believe that a woman who was not ugly and not senile might prefer to be left alone for an hour or two. No waiters were in sight when she reached the restaurant car, and she chose a table for two, sitting with her back to the engine.

This set up a situation. Any Italians of almost any age, travelling free from the supervision of wife, mother or other female relative, would, at sight of her, make rapid estimates of her sexual attractions and, if the total was satisfactory, compete for the vacant place at her table. It would make no difference that there were other seats vacant. If the head waiter became aware in time, he might intervene, but only in order to levy a tax on the amorous adventurers: the highest bidder would secure the seat of privilege opposite the foreign woman travelling alone. She had learned, years ago, from Italian friends that the best resource open to a woman in such a situation was to call the head waiter, explain that she was an eccentric intent on privacy, and tip him, quite heavily, to make sure he understood. She had opened her handbag and was searching in it for notes of a suitable size when she heard a loud, clear, cheerful voice exclaiming in

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English: 'My dear Mrs Kent, how very nice to see you!'

She looked up and it was Peter Paul Robinson.

At the same moment the head waiter arrived beside the table, perhaps conscious that he had missed two extra tips, but, in the Italian style, pleased to see people about to eat and drink and hopeful that, at the end of the meal, he would obtain his just reward.

Peter Paul was not going to leave the train at Florence.

'There are lots of pictures there,' he said facetiously, 'but the Italian Government won't sell.'

She knew, everybody knew, that there were practically no old pictures of value to be bought in Italy. For two centuries English milords had bought them up, Napoleon had looted and not all his loot had been returned. What survived was locked away in museums and palaces. Why therefore, had a London art dealer come to Italy?

When they had ordered lunch, she asked him.

He said, smiling, that it was a secret and so reminded her that she must herself be on guard. It would never do for Peter Paul to gather the faintest intimation that, after all these years, she intended to sell her Tintoretto.

He was a tall man but quite slenderly built, and with his large, brown, eloquent eyes, his long narrow hands and the firm set of his mouth, pink and mobile, he looked more artistic than most artists succeed in doing. He was not merely a dealer but a connoisseur. He appreciated fine quality. He appreciated it in food and in wine, but did not waste time and energy making pointless comparisons between the Italian luncheon they ate and French food with its subtleties and finesse.

They were passing the long, tall, biscuit-coloured walls

of a Chianti manufactory, south of Florence, before luncheon was finished. The tourist season had not yet begun, so no one was likely to come along the corridors in search of tea. Only the *rapido* was in a hurry, everyone else was at leisure, and coffee was not served until Arezzo fell behind them.

It was only then that Peter Paul mentioned business – his own business: hers he left discreetly alone. Or perhaps it had no interest for him?

‘You are not the first,’ he said, ‘to ask what pictures a picture dealer hopes to pick up in Italy? The answer is – none at all. What I am in search of is customers.’

‘Italian customers?’

‘Perhaps. But it is difficult to sell to an Italian millionaire. He resents, not unnaturally, buying back works of art which originated in his own country.’

‘Americans?’ she asked.

Peter Paul smiled.

Everybody knew that Rome, that part of it which lay along the Via Veneto had become as American as Grosvenor Square.

Peter Paul was enjoying his cigar, more than ever the symbol of the well-to-do since the medical profession, or some part of it, had put forward the proposition that a cigar was less likely to cause cancer of the lung than a pipe, and a pipe than the popular cigarette. Eleanor, who had given up smoking some years before, still liked the smell of a cigar. If she had allowed herself to analyse her liking, she might have found that it was because she associated cigar smoke with maturity and masculinity, as well as with prosperity.

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'There are more rich Americans than ever,' said Peter Paul, 'and more of them want to buy expensive pictures. The demand exceeds the supply. There are also Government regulations. If I could get my hands on all——'

She thought she knew what had come into his mind and had broken off the sentence midway. One of the things he would like to buy and sell again was the Tintoretto. He looked disconcerted, almost abashed, but only for a second, and only for a second it occurred to her that, by a probably meaningless chance, the additional thought had come into his mind that he would like to lay hands on her. He was old enough to be her father, and, although she realised he was a man who liked women and the society of women, she had not included this in his general appreciation of fine quality. She presumed that she ought to feel flattered. She was certainly not angry.

Instead of talking about money and markets, he switched the conversation to Venetian painting and eventually, with no indecent haste, brought it, by way of the unending demand for Guardi canal scenes and *capriccios* to the great Tiepolo frescoes at Wurzburg, to Veronese and his love of passing off banquet scenes as biblical pictures, on to genuinely religious painting, and so to Tintoretto.

'There is a real artist,' he said. 'I don't mean, he was soulful or exceptionally sensitive, although he may have been. I call Tintoretto a real artist because painting was what mattered to him. The subject, I fancy, was only incidental, whether it was taken from the Bible or the life of a saint, or something about gods and goddesses. Like your picture, for example.'

She had a few other pictures: nobody every bothered about them.

'Look,' said Peter Paul, 'I'm a dealer after all. Just suppose you *were* prepared to sell. How much would you want for it?'

'I haven't thought,' she said.

'Oh, yes you have. You must have done.'

She felt almost sorry she was under promise to Willie Savoy and could not tell him that she had indeed changed her mind and the 'Venus with the Fan' would soon be sold, but at public auction.

'If you won't value the picture, I must,' he said. 'Just in case you get other approaches, as I'm sure you do.'

She neither closed her eyes nor opened them wide: she tried to look enigmatic, in the hope that he would not realise he had startled her.

'I'll put a proposition before you,' he said, very serious now. 'Let us fix a basic price for the picture. I would pay that price as soon as you let me take it away to my show-rooms. Then I would set about selling it. It might take weeks, it might take months to get hold of the right person or the right institution. What I suggest is that you leave it to me to obtain the biggest profit, and then you and I split it, fifty-fifty.'

'What figure had you in mind,' she asked, 'for this basic price?'

'My dear Mrs Kent,' he said, with an air of candour, 'I could start low, at say twenty thousand or fifty thousand, and go up. But why should I? Instead, I'll take a chance. I will pay you – as the basic price, remember, with perhaps

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as much again coming to us as profit, on half and half shares – I will pay you whatever you have the picture insured for.’

‘You’re very rash,’ she said, almost as if she were reproving a small boy, but also, she realised suddenly, rather in the way a woman chides a man she admires for running risks at some manly, open-air recreation.

She watched him carefully to see the effect when she disclosed the sum he had committed himself to pay if she chose to say ‘it’s a deal’.

‘A hundred thousand pounds,’ she told him, keeping her voice low but clear.

If it was a higher figure than he had expected, he gave no sign.

‘I’ll write you a cheque now,’ he said.

She might reckon this moment the greatest temptation. to which she had ever been submitted. She enjoyed it. She smiled, and then she laughed, but as she laughed she began to shake her head in negation.

‘Even if I were to take you seriously,’ she explained, ‘I never act on impulse. Not if I can help it.’

He was to stay at a different hotel in Rome, a much grander one than hers, and he did not pretend that they were likely to meet during the next few days.

‘Unless, of course, you should change your mind.’

The knowledge that she had so much money on call lent her a great access of self-confidence. There was another way in which the accidental meeting with Peter Paul Robinson did her good, for he was very attentive, when they left the restaurant car, taking down her coat for her and her bag and her gloves; almost like an Italian. And

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like an Italian, he let her know, as he helped her put on her coat, by the proximity rather than the occasional contact of his hands, that he considered her an attractive and desirable woman.

CHAPTER NINE

Willing Young Woman

James Hogan was surprised to find his thoughts returning, on several successive days, to a painting he had seen only once and because of which he had been rebuffed. It was not the refusal from Savoy which irked him so much as the fact that the owner of the picture, to whom he had written, had not bothered to answer him herself. No doubt she received, in the course of a year, many letters asking for photographs, and no doubt turned them over to Savoy as a matter of routine, but it was unlikely that to other enquirers of any standing Savoy would pretend that no photographs were 'available'. Savoy was petty-minded and he had lost his temper at the mere suggestion that anyone but Tintoretto might be the author of the 'Venus' picture. Hence the snub.

Eleanor Kent should never have let it happen! She ought to have made it her business to know what Savoy was up to and stopped him. Better still, she ought to have answered the polite request herself. She had not done so and James Hogan presently made the unflattering deduction that she considered him a man of no importance – that is, of no importance to her.

If there was anything to be learned from studying a photograph of the 'Venus with the Fan' it would probably

be by comparisons. It was always more rewarding to compare photograph with photograph rather than photographs with original paintings or drawings. By some oversight (but it had not reproduced the picture at the time of the Burlington House exhibition nearly a decade ago) the *Reformer* did not appear to have a photograph in its files.

‘That sort of thing,’ said the art editor, ‘we usually ring round the agencies for.’

He looked at Hogan then, and obviously, although nothing was spoken, it was up to Hogan to request that a photograph be obtained for his use. He had scruples. Ever since he joined the paper, and found himself in a position of considerable influence, if not direct power, he had been careful not to exploit it. In many quarters favours could, and would with the slightest encouragement, be done him. He might, for example, more than once have bought a drawing he coveted for his own collection at a price much lower than would be asked from a collector who did not go regularly into public print. If he once accepted favours, his judgment would be corrupted. He made himself scrupulous in small matters also, and a second’s thought now shewed him that, whatever he needed the photograph for (and he was not quite clear himself on this point) it could not, as yet at any rate, be called part of his duties as art critic to the *Reformer*.

The following day something made him remember the picture shop near the corner of Bute Street, and the red chalk drawing he had seen in the window there at a time when the shop was closed. He remembered that the use of red chalk in that particular drawing had seemed odd. He

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cautioned himself against making such a statement, even in the privacy of his own thoughts, as that the use of red chalk for that drawing represented an error by the unknown draughtsman, and amended the comment till it ran: red chalk was not what he would have expected in that drawing. He began to wonder why.

Two days later, after he had attended, with other critics, a new exhibition at a Knightsbridge gallery, he decided to visit Bute Street again. He came to this part of London more often by car than afoot, and now he walked rather too far along the Cromwell Road, almost as though he were making for Queen's Gate. He was forced to turn back and make his way past and behind the new building of the Institut Français to get into Harrington Gardens and Bute Street.

He searched the window: there were still three framed drawings among the small pictures displayed there, but the one he had come to examine was not visible. Disappointment made him, as though he were still a child, feel quite cold and sick. He had no one to blame but himself. He could have written to the shop, where he was known, over the week-end. He could have telephoned. Instead, he had forgotten. Goods, even goods which rank as works of art, are displayed in windows in order to attract customers. It was stupid of him to be surprised that the drawing should have gone. It did not follow that it had been sold. It might have been withdrawn from the window for any one of a dozen reasons. The way to find out was to push open the door, enter the shop and ask. He could not account for his hesitation, and he could not overcome it either.

Uncomfortably aware of conflict, within his own mind, setting up a kind of temporary double vision in his image of himself, he turned away and walked back, the way he had come, along the little street of new shops, each, not unsuccessfully, trying to look like a boutique. Rounding the café at the corner, and coming towards him, was a young woman who, in one disturbing second, he recognised. He recognised her, despite the modish clothes she wore now, as Eleanor Kent's daughter.

It would only make for muddle and mess and elaborate explanations he did not want to give, if he went on and the girl saw him so that he had to stop and talk. Before the thought was complete in his mind, he had swung round and, increasing his pace, made his way back to the shop and in through the door.

He was recognised and welcomed. He moved forward, as if he had come to look at the larger pictures displayed in the room opening out at the back of the shop. From that point of vantage he took a glance, through the window, to the street and saw, above the curtain rail, a white wool hat, a floppy cone with the point blunted, swaying past.

'I was wondering,' he said, 'about a drawing I noticed in the window last week. A red chalk nude study. I suppose somebody has bought it?'

Some dealers would have answered such a clumsy and incautious approach by implying that the drawing was in great demand and that several people, having seen it once, were about to come back and clinch a deal. The Bute Street dealer was not of this kind. Hogan believed that he spoke the truth habitually, and now he said: 'No I haven't sold it yet.'

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The drawing, produced from a shelf in the back room, still in its frame, was even more attractive and stimulating than Hogan had remembered it. When he took it into his hands, he felt first an intense relief and then a lively curiosity. He saw now that there was one element in the drawing which gave it an odd air of belonging not (where it certainly did belong) to the sixteenth century but to the present day: the head of the young woman, well constructed but simplified, was, in proportion to the body, a little undersized. It put him in mind of some of Henry Moore's figure sculptures, although this head, drawn in a very fine red chalk, was not so reduced in scale as to be disquieting and inhuman in effect. Its smallness merely made the arms and shoulders of the young woman seem bigger and stronger. This effect was enhanced by the pronounced tapering of the flanks into the waist before the swelling line of hip and thigh began.

More important was his perception that a thin, almost pencil thin, piece of red chalk, probably clamped into a metal holder, must have been used by the draughtsman. Such a technique was not Venetian: it belonged to the tradition of Florence and, of course, of Rome in that Rome, the city of the Popes, had attracted and commanded the services and presence of the great Florentine artists. What he was looking at was a Cinquecento drawing in the Venetian style so far as the modelling went, and the sitter, also, could be put down as a Venetian woman but – he would swear to it! – done by a Florentine or a Roman.

There was one name, of a good though not popularly known artist, which would fulfil all requirements. The name ought to be at the tip of his tongue. He

knew it perfectly well, yet he could not call it to mind.

A ruled mount set off the drawing under the glass. He turned the whole thing over. There was a backing of thin wood, and this was held in place, round all the edges with broad strips of gummed paper. So long as the glass remained firm in the frame, the picture became an airtight and damp-proof package, protecting the small drawing not only from dirt but from damp and fungus infection. Those of his own drawings which were hung on walls were all put up more or less in this way, but not until he had examined them carefully back and front, with a magnifying glass and made notes not only of dimensions and the materials used, but of the kind of paper, whether it was wire-marked and chain-marked, whether any identifiable water-marks were visible, any stamps or other signs indicating that it had belonged to one of the collectors of of the past who used this method of identifying their possessions.

Hogan liked to believe that he never bought a drawing until he had seen it twice, on different days: it was a rule he had respected with this red chalk study. His second self-imposed rule was never to buy a drawing in a frame. Behind glass, and with no access to the back, a drawing was always a pig in a poke. This time he let the second rule go. He took a chance.

‘How much?’

‘Ten guineas.’

Not cheap, he decided, but perhaps not dear. It irritated him to think that part of the price must be represented by a frame which he did not want and which prevented him from completing his appraisal.

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'All right,' he said, and took out his cheque book.

Now that he had committed himself he felt a familiar mingled sensation of excitement and satisfaction, which almost at once turned into a longing for the moment when he could cut away the paper and board at the back, take the drawing out, and examine properly his new possession. He could obtain the necessary privacy at the *Reformer* offices, as soon as he had written his 'copy' for the next day's paper. The drawing was put up into a parcel for him. He said 'thank you' and 'good-bye.' He left the shop.

On the pavement outside he found Barbara Kent waiting for him.

He was furious. He lacked the egotism, however, to let any of his feelings show in his face or his manner. He raised his hat, he wished the girl good afternoon, he made two side steps to get round her, and believed he had escaped. The conical white hat bobbed up at his side.

She was in herself not interesting to him and, at the moment, a nuisance, but he remembered whose daughter she was.

'Oh,' the girl said, 'my mother's all right, I think.'

It was as if she did not care and considered it strange of him to have made an enquiry which, after all, was no more than an impersonal politeness.

'What did you buy?'

He held up the small package.

'But what's inside?' she persisted.

He said that it was a drawing, but her curiosity remained unabated.

'I would like to see it,' she said.

He wondered if she expected him to stop there, in the

Old Brompton Road, and unfasten the brown paper? Or had he been given the cue to invite her into the nearest coffee bar? From the little he knew of such places, the light inside was not nearly good enough to examine a drawing by.

'Art,' she said, with a confessional air, 'isn't one of my subjects, but I'm interested. Truly I am. You haven't forgotten I came to your lecture?'

He was thankful, after all these years, that he had refused to take up his scholarship at Oxford: with his bent for study, Oxford might well have made a don of him, and then he would have had to cope with an annual flow of earnest young women like this one, full of uncritical enthusiasm and apt to become emotional about it.

This one, for some reason of her own, mentioned his visit to her mother's flat and said: 'You can't stand Willie Savoy, can you?'

He was not prepared to answer that, and gave her question for question: 'So you call him Willie?'

'Not to his face,' the girl admitted. 'But that's because I was only a child when I first knew him. It makes it awkward.'

'Mr Savoy,' he said, 'has refused to let me buy a photograph of the 'Venus with the Fan'.

The girl at his side stopped, forcing him also to come to a halt. If she was really taken by surprise she was dramatising it.

'Do you really mean to say——? How dreadful!'

They were facing each other on the broad pavement close to the stopping place where he would be able to escape on to a bus.

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'It's scandalous, that's what it is!' she said. She was making altogether too much of his grievance.

'It may be true,' Hogan protested, 'that there are no photographs available just now.'

'It's not true at all. I know where there are three or four. Why don't you come in? I'll soon find one for you.'

The time was ten minutes to five. Her mother would presumably still be working in the City but it could not be very long before she arrived home. Besides, there was the housekeeper.

'It's very kind of you' he said. 'You're sure it's all right?'

'Why on earth shouldn't it be?'

As they walked along Queen's Gate he explained his scruples.

'If your mother doesn't want me to have a photograph, then of course I wouldn't dream of taking one.'

The girl gave him a look, as much as to say: 'Stop talking nonsense!' It wasn't nonsense, and he went on to make his point.

'I did throw out a hint that possibly the picture may not be by Tintoretto. I suppose that may have upset Mr Savoy. I don't particularly care about offending him, but your mother – that's a very different matter.'

'My mother,' the girl said, with finality, 'is not interested in art. I am.'

She took him up in the lift, telling the porter she would not forget to send it down again. He thought the porter gave her a surprised look, and in return she stared at the porter, while she spoke, defiantly. The point of all this was lost on Hogan until the girl opened the front door of the flat with first one key, then another, and when he had

followed her in, closed it behind him.

In the hall, she said: 'You can leave your things here.'

She would not allow him to put down the parcelled up drawing.

'I'll take it,' she said. 'You promised to let me have a look.'

There seemed to be no one else in the flat, and he was taken aback when she said: 'It's Tuesday. Miss Henderson's day off. She's seeing friends at Tunbridge Wells, I think.'

The girl spoke as though Tunbridge Wells were a very remote place and as she spoke she looked him straight in the eye. He realised suddenly that his presence constituted an adventure for the eighteen-year-old girl. She was alone in a flat with someone she probably thought of as 'an older man' – and for some years newspapers and magazines had promoted the idea, derived from the success of certain film stars and from a number of much publicised marriages, that to young women a man in his forties, or even in his fifties, was more attractive than their own contemporaries.

Hogan guessed that Barbara Kent, out of mischief and curiosity, was taking a chance with him. She wanted to give him an opportunity – in fact, she seemed already to have contrived that – and see what he made of it, secure in the knowledge that before anything could happen which she did not wish to happen, her mother would arrive home. It seemed to him a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose game: it might be a childish prank, but, had he been a different sort of man, or, to put another alternative, had he found her more tempting than she was, the experiment might have proved dangerous to them both. He did not know what was in her mind. He observed that, from the moment

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she closed the door behind him, she became self-consciously provocative in her bearing. The devices she used were commonplace and probably copied from the stage and the cinema. She hollowed her back so that her head, the white hat now removed, was carried a little higher and her breasts thrown forward and modelled under the thin knitted jersey. When she was not, with turns and jerks of her head, making her eyes flash, she closed them briefly, letting the long lashes darken against her olive brown cheeks until, slowly and with significance, she opened her eyes again and, speaking with them in terms which had nothing to do with what she was saying, proclaimed her own pride in being no longer a schoolgirl but a young woman.

It was a preposterous exhibition. In a way it was also pathetic. She had led him to the drawing-room where he wanted to ignore her and give his attention to the large painting on the one, uncluttered wall. She offered him a drink, and when, to gain a moment's respite, he accepted, she poured gin and vermouth for herself as well. He made another error in tactics, when, thinking only of how soon he could get away or, failing that, how soon the girl's mother would return, he swallowed his drink quickly. The girl then swallowed hers. The next moment she asked if he would like another.

He refused the drink and suggested: 'How about finding that photograph for me?'

'Plenty of time for that,' Barbara said pertly. 'First I want to see your drawing.'

She looked straight at him, making it clear that she considered herself in command of the situation, as she

picked up the parcel and prepared to unfasten the brown paper.

'You know,' she said, 'I saw you go into that shop. I didn't just happen to be there when you came out. I was waiting a few yards away, by the wine merchants.'

What she was saying, in effect, was that she had made a dead set at him.

'Don't you want to know why?' she asked. She was, beyond doubt, asking for all she could get, she was not going to get it from him.

'You wanted to look at the drawing,' he reminded her.

As if she could think of nothing to do except obey his suggestion, she loosened the packing paper and took the framed drawing out from it.

'Very well,' she said meekly. 'Now tell me why you bought it.'

'Because I liked it.'

She was dissatisfied.

'There was another reason,' he admitted. 'I wanted the drawing because I don't understand it.'

'What don't you understand?'

'Well, that's the way Venetians saw women. No one can be sure but, unless the women of Venice have changed a great deal in the last few centuries, it means that the models for Tintoretto and Veronese and Tiepolo were all rather undersized. About five foot high. But the painters saw them as goddesses, larger than life. You'll notice that this won an, although the drawing is so small, gives an impression of super-abundance.'

Barbara said: 'I see what you mean, although she's not what I would call very beautiful.'

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At that, she came, with a flash of her eyes, out of the art critical world back into the vibrant atmosphere of sexual provocation. She was drawing attention to the fact that the model in the drawing was of a sturdier and more compact build than herself, and implying that, if he were Paris, the arbiter of so many pictured contests, and she, as naked as the girl in the drawing, were competing against her, he could not fail to award the prize for beauty to Barbara Kent.

Hogan decided that they would stick to art criticism.

Aloud, he said: 'It's not very Mannerist. It's a long way from, for example, Parmigianino or Rosso. I think it must have been done in Venice, or somewhere close to Venice. But, you see, the technique is from further south. From Florence.'

At that moment, unheralded, unsought, and not very conveniently, the name of the artist who, he was convinced must be the author of the red chalk sketch, came back to his mind. It was Giuseppe Porta. Sometimes called Giuseppe Salviati. He was not Florentine. He had learned his craft in Rome, but he learned it from a Florentine artist, the great Mannerist, Francesco Salviati. Hogan could not think of any drawing by Giuseppe Porta precisely in the style of this one, but a happy certitude possessed him. Porta filled the bill. Porta was undoubtedly the man.

What was more, Porta had something, direct or indirect, near or remote, to do with the 'Venus' picture which, as he turned towards it, seemed to stare back at him with an enigmatic promise of secrets still to be disclosed.

He looked again at the drawing, which the girl at his side was holding, so that he also could examine it.

‘What a lot you must know!’ she exclaimed admiringly.

That was stupid of her, to assume that what he was essaying to do proceeded merely from study. It needed also an eye for likenesses and unlikenesses, an eye for period, an eye for individual manifestations of style at different periods of development, an eye, above all, to see what an artist had caused to be put on canvas or paper as distinct from what an acquaintance with criticism prompted one to see there. If the girl had been more intelligent, if she had possessed any capacity for thinking for herself she might have been able to help him, instead of turning on him a glance which now was as soft and lambent and inviting as – what was the standard comparison? Did one say doe-like eyes? Or cow-like? She was, for all her physical development, still a child, and it was unfair of him to brutalise her in his thoughts, even though his thoughts would never be spoken.

She had no such inhibitions. She spoke her own thoughts from lips she had shaped with what was, for his taste, too pale a red. Her eyebrows, also, were artificially made, with two broad black strokes of paint from the inside outwards, but quite straight and stopping short half way. There was mascara blobbed about on her eyelashes. He did not remember that she had used cosmetics so lavishly, although, like her off-Chelsea uniform of wool jumper and tubular skirt coming only to the knees, worn with coloured stockings (which, by all accounts, were pantomime tights) it was conventional and commonplace in 1960 London. She had piled her dark hair so high that it looked like a chocolate sweet he remembered under the name of ‘whipped-cream walnut’.

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What she said was a coyness without glint a of humour to redeem it.

'Is it,' she asked, 'only women in pictures that you're interested in?'

She turned away to put the framed drawing on a table and as she turned back, she came close to him until he felt the points of her brassiere touching his coat and not drawing back: she moved in still closer, pressing against him with her hips and thighs. She went on talking but in a very low tone, and what she was saying did not matter to either of them.

He stepped back and said, sharply but in the clear, even voice suitable for a social occasion: 'What time does Mrs Kent get home?'

'If there's one thing I can't stand,' the girl exclaimed, 'it's being treated like a child.'

He was about to retort that she was still a child, but her whole body was speaking for her in eloquent contradiction.

Her voice reinforced it.

'I have a right to my own personality, my own life,' she claimed, 'independent of my mother.'

'But when——'

'She won't be coming. Not today. She's in Rome. Or Zürich. I'm not sure which. And what difference does it make?'

He tried to think fast but calmly. The girl was the one who had brought about the situation, the classic situation in which a man and woman were alone together, at a suitable time in suitable circumstances, for – what was the aseptic phrase? – sexual intercourse. Although

nothing of that sort had happened, and nothing was going to happen, if the girl afterwards chose to claim that it had happened, who would disbelieve her?

'Are you scared?' she asked, her voice derisory as well as provocative.

He could in a way, understand her. She had been born into, and grown up in, a civilisation which found its own professed beliefs and principles unconvincing. Even before she reached the age of puberty, she must have become aware of innumerable manifestations of sexuality all around her. Newspapers and magazines, cinemas and theatres, the pictorial covers of books, coloured posters on hoardings as she went to and from school, all would tell her insistently that the value of a woman was her physical attractions for men. Chief among those attractions was the breasts, and thousands of commercial depictions, in colour or in black and white, would instruct her that the most successful woman was the one with the most prominent breasts. She was a child of her age, and her age was sex-mad.

He had little doubt that she was still a virgin. She had probably selected him for this experiment partly because he was conveniently at hand and partly because she assumed that he, being so much older, would, once she gave the signal with her eyes and a few bodily contacts, take the initiative and put her, with knowledgeable hands, through the desired experience. There she had made a mistake. There she failed to realise that he was a man who, for his own reasons, had opted out of sexuality.

He had stepped back, and now she came after him again. It was absurd. It made him feel like the virtuous Joseph,

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in many an old picture, escaping, half naked, from the clutches of Potiphar's wife.

'Why not?' the girl demanded. 'Why shouldn't we? You're not going to tell me you believe in morality?'

She should not have brought up that word. It gave him a chance to divert her.

'Not,' he began cautiously, 'old fashioned morality——'

'All morality is old fashioned,' the girl declared.

He did not mind getting the worst of the argument, provided the argument continued.

'Besides,' she said, 'there's The Bomb. If they build the new station, we shall get a four-minute warning, shan't we? Any hour of any day. So what's the point of wasting time?'

He ought not to have been surprised. Ever since the war years he had been able to observe how many young women had overthrown tradition and were not only active but aggressive in sexual encounters, even in public places, even in the Park in broad daylight. Perhaps he ought to be grateful to this one that she was not offering herself to him alfresco? Suddenly, she began to weep. The defiant erectness vanished, as her shoulders sagged and came forward, from her taut twentieth century bosom. She bent her head and began to sob. He was so upset that, like a fool, he took a step towards her, and the next moment her hands were clutching, agitated and demanding, at his arms. She lurched against him.

He pushed her away and, stepping back, knocked the framed drawing off the table where it had been left. He bent at once to retrieve it and experienced a private moment of relief as he saw that, although the glass had

been cracked from side to side, the drawing, behind its mount, appeared unharmed. As he stood up again and replaced the drawing on the table, the girl, weeping noisily now, raised both her arms above her head and brought her clenched fists down to beat them, in an agony of exasperation, on the top of his shoulders.

'You swine!' she cried. 'You led me on and now you've tugged me down. I hate you!'

He had trained himself to respect the truth and to speak it, but now, at a moment of desperation, a useful lie occurred to him, and was no sooner thought of than spoken.

'Very well,' he said, 'but I think I ought to tell you why. You seem to think I'm as free as you are.'

It penetrated her emotional storm, and when it penetrated it took her by surprise.

'You've married again?'

What difference would that make if she believed in her 1960-no-morality and her philosophy of eat, drink and fornicate for tomorrow The Bomb bursts?

'There are other kinds of attachments,' he said.

She wanted everything explicit.

'You're in love with some other woman?'

That was her get-out. That was what she needed to restore her self-esteem. It was the reign of Dr Freud and the age of strip-tease and atomic explosions, but a man whose affections were already bespoken could be excused for not leaping into bed with a willing young woman however attractive she might be. The converse to this theorem was that a girl was not to be blamed for failing to get such a man into bed with her.

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Barbara Kent, he guessed, was by nature less readily amorous than she pretended to be. She had got him alone in the flat and incited him to make love to her because such behaviour was conventional in 1960 among certain people of her own age. She had been trying to keep up with the Beatnik Joneses! To him the strange thing was that a few minor physical contacts and a thwarted embrace seemed to have calmed her down. Perhaps her temperament fitted her less for the directness of love than for a self-analytic intensity in emotional relationships?

Not even words were necessary to deceive her: he conveyed the romantic information that he was in love with another woman merely by bowing his head.

She credited him, now exonerated from blame for rejecting her, with a view of all those phenomena classified under the word 'love' similar to her own.

'I never thought of that,' she exclaimed. 'And you were faithful to her. I respect you for that.'

She was so solemn about it that Hogan, triumphant in a secret successful lie, felt a pang of remorse.

'I belong to an older generation,' he reminded her. 'My childhood was before 1939. In theory I quite see there is no special value to be laid on monogamy. I realise it's no more than a social and economic convenience, but, you see, I happen to be terribly in love.'

It startled him to hear the note of sincerity ring out in his voice as he spoke this amplification of the original lie.

He had found a formula which allowed them both to part without overmuch awkwardness. It was also important that when they met again she should not feel disconcerted or resentful. To make quite sure, it was

necessary for him to put into her head, in so many words, the idea of forgetfulness.

'What I've just told you is in strict confidence,' he said. 'It's so secret that I haven't told anyone else in the world.'

He intended her to feel that she had been granted a privilege, and the response shone in her dark eyes.

'When you go out of this flat,' she assured him gravely, 'everything will be forgotten for ever and ever.'

That was all he needed to hear. She had bound herself with a ready-made phrase. He insisted that he did not need to be shown out. He picked up his hat and his rain-coat in the hall and was delayed only when he tried to open the front door. It took him a few seconds to realise that the top lock, the smaller one, had been snapped on. It was thus double-locked from the inside and, with or without a key, could not be opened from the outside. The girl must have pressed the brass stud down when she brought him into the flat and closed the door behind him. No one could say she had lacked forethought in making her experiment.

He walked away down the stairs and out to the street and, so far as he knew, the porter did not see him leave. He was in an Underground train, on his way to Fleet Street, before he realised that he had left the drawing behind him. He cursed, but not for one second did he consider the possibility of going back to collect it.

CHAPTER TEN

A Matter of Opinion

Eleanor Kent flew back from Zürich on a Friday afternoon and took the coach from London Airport to the Air Terminal, which was only a few hundred yards from her flat. There she was met by her housekeeper with the news that her daughter, leaving apologies and messages of affection, had gone away for the week-end.

‘Where?’

Miss Henderson found the piece of paper on which Barbara had written an address.

‘You’re invited too, if you care to go,’ said Miss Henderson. ‘Miss Barbara said you would know the telephone number.’

It would be noted down in a book somewhere, for the people, through Claude Kent, were Barbara’s blood relations. She hardly knew them and had no intention of going to join Barbara in the picturesque and avowedly literary village in Sussex where they lived.

There were three letters which had arrived too late to be forwarded. Only one mattered. It was from Willie Savoy and told her that, as she wished, a date in June, before Derby Day, had been agreed for the auctioning of the ‘Venus with the Fan’. Another date, only a week or two ahead, was to be appointed for the first public

announcement that the picture was going to be sold. The announcement would be released through a news agency and would reach America and the countries of Western Europe virtually at the same time. The auctioneers did not wish the painting to be delivered to their premises until the end of May.

'They won't commit themselves,' Willie wrote, 'but they've dropped a pretty broad hint that they'll be disappointed if it fetches less than £200,000.'

Well, there it was, in writing, at last: a huge, a fantastically huge, figure, and surely, if the firm was thinking and talking of two hundred thousand, that meant that they expected more. A quarter of a million! Even with commission deducted, it was an immense sum, a fortune. She permitted herself, soberly, with a sense of reality absent from dreams and daydreams, the thought that, becoming so rich, she would be able to stop work and enjoy herself, without a single worry, for all the rest of her life.

The telephone rang.

She did not recognise the voice and did not, at first, catch the name it gave. When she understood who was speaking, she became apologetic and her own voice, she thought, self-conscious and strange to her own ears.

'Mr Hogan? I'm so sorry. I've only just got back from abroad.'

'I know,' he said.

How on earth could he know?

He explained. 'Your daughter told me you were coming back today. I rang the Airport to find which plane you were on.'

Why should he do that? Why should he be on the

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telephone almost as soon as she put her nose inside her own front door?

The explanation was a let-down. The man had bought a drawing and mislaid it somewhere and wanted to get it back. Obviously she came into the matter only because her daughter was away for the week-end.

'I don't know anything about it, Mr Hogan. I haven't even unpacked yet.'

It was his turn to apologise. He was almost abject but he did not ring off. She caught the phrase: 'It means a lot to me!'

It could not mean two hundred thousand pounds! He was the man who had suggested that her Tintoretto was not a Tintoretto at all and she would have dearly loved to tell him that his fanciful notion was not shared by a famous firm, on whose premises many of the world's greatest masterpieces had been put up for sale. He was a journalist: in less than a fortnight the secret would be disclosed to him and he would have to make a splash about it in the columns of the *Reformer* and if, in the meantime, he wanted his precious drawing, it would be a shame not to help him recover it.

'Hold on a minute.'

She put down the telephone, stood up, and looked round the drawing-room, but was unable to see anything there which could be described as a drawing and yet did not belong to her.

She picked up the telephone again. 'Mr Hogan, what's it like?'

'Oh, it's not big, and it's framed, and the glass is cracked.'

It did not sound impressive. She went to the kitchen and found Miss Henderson and asked her.

'Oh yes, Miss Barbara did mention it. She didn't know whether to ring up that man, whatever his name is, I can't remember, but I said there was no need. If he's anxious for it, I said he'll come and get it.'

From a drawer, Miss Henderson produced a small, square picture in a gilt frame.

'It seems to me,' said Miss Henderson, her voice becoming very Edinburgh and very genteel, 'that there are too many nudes about the place these days. I put it out of sight.'

Eleanor went back to the drawing-room and the telephone, propping the little picture in front of her.

'Well, Mr Hogan, I've found it. At least, I think it must be what you want. It's red chalk and the glass is not only cracked – a bit of it seems to be missing.'

Quickly the voice at the other end of the telephone wire asked: 'The drawing hasn't been damaged, has it?'

She looked to make sure.

'It seems all right to me, but you'd better come and collect it and then you can judge for yourself.'

'May I? May I really? When?'

'I'm rather tired,' she said, 'but if you're not far away—?'

'I'm not,' he assured her eagerly. 'I'll be with you in five minutes.'

She went to tidy her hair and to put right any deficiencies in her make-up. She would have liked to be looking fresher and, had she cared to go through the disheartening catalogue, she could have reminded herself of many things she disliked about her own face. Because she had com-

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posure and held herself well, she could have borne comparison with many girls of Barbara's age. It was women a little older, in the mid-twenties and up to the age of thirty, whom she would not care to have in close proximity to her if she had been hoping to gain the attention of an attractive man.

These thoughts were frivolous and irrelevant, and she put them aside to consider whether it would not do her morale good to change quickly out of the blue frock in which she had travelled, into, say, one of the blacks, which suggested the start of an evening, or – as she was longing to do – the blue silk, the one with the dot-and-dash pattern she had bought in Milan and worn only once, in Rome. These thoughts came to nothing, for the sound of the front door bell told her that James Hogan, unable to live any longer without his precious drawing, had arrived.

The drawing-room door was open and she saw him before she entered. He was standing beside the window, holding the framed drawing where the light fell full on it. He was not so tall as she had fancied but he could not be described as short. Perhaps the reason one expected him to look a little taller was that he was a strongly built man, not only broad in the shoulder but deep-chested. He stood firmly planted on his feet, too. He did not at all conform to her idea of an art historian. Her husband, although he would not have said it in so many words, would, she knew, have classed Hogan as slightly vulgar. It was, her thoughts protested, the wrong word.

He heard her as she reached the doorway, dropped his hand, still holding the framed drawing, to his side and gave

her an almost imperceptible and rather jerky bow as he greeted her. He was not so sure of himself as when they first met and possibly he transgressed the niceties of polite behaviour by speaking to his hostess before she had herself greeted him. A socially punctilious man, also, in a situation like this, would have refrained from touching the drawing and possibly even from acknowledging its presence in the room until he received permission to do so. She was talking to him, answering his enquiries (which were all any book of etiquette could demand) about her journey, but somewhere in her mind an observant part of herself was asking why she was submitting this man to so close and analytic a scrutiny? Why could she not take him for granted, for what he was, a pleasant, intelligent and not uninteresting acquaintance?

She told him that her daughter had gone away for the week-end: he seemed neither surprised nor interested. She remembered then to ask her necessary, maternal enquiries.

'I'm not quite clear, Mr Hogan, how your drawing got into my flat?'

'I left it here. By mistake.'

'Yes, but how did you come to be here? By mistake also?'

This was intended to show that she had a sense of humour, in order to mitigate the effect she might be creating of an interrogation. It failed to put him at his ease.

'Miss Kent asked me in. You see, I had just bought this drawing at a shop in Bute Street.'

He gave her what she described, instantly, to herself, as a pleading glance. She had no defence against it and told

him, as if she were giving an assurance he sorely stood in need of: 'Oh yes, I know the place you mean.'

He seemed to take heart.

'Just as I came out, there was Miss Kent and we walked along together and I - I'm afraid I grouched a bit about Mr Savoy.'

Quietly, behind a face she hoped was now expressionless, Eleanor Kent put herself on guard.

'Really?' she said. 'And what had Mr Savoy done?'

Hogan was self-confident again, even a little aggressive.

'I wrote to you,' he said, 'and asked for a photograph of your "Venus" picture. You passed it on, I presume, to Mr Savoy. Fair enough. But when he wrote to me - and he took his time about it - he refused.'

'What!'

'Well, he refused in effect. He said there were no photographs available.'

'That was stupid of Willie,' she thought. He was, however, an old friend, and a strictly honorary adviser. She could not permit a stranger to run poor Willie down in her presence.

'If Mr Savoy said there were no photographs available,' she declared, 'you may take it there were none.'

She had been treating this Mr Hogan like a schoolboy, but he was a man, and a man of her own age, and he let her know it now obliquely but angrily.

'The negative is in existence somewhere,' he declared. 'You know that. So does Savoy.'

He had dropped the 'Mister'.

'So long as there is a negative, it's only a matter of a few hours to make prints. I need a photograph. I need it for

my work. And what Savoy was saying was that photographs were available to anyone except me.'

This was doubtless a correct interpretation of how Willie's mind had worked. She had to keep her secret for another eleven days and the less that was said about the painting, which would have come into his view had he turned his gaze only slightly away from her, the better.

‘I suppose I should not have mentioned it to Miss Kent,’ he admitted, ‘but I felt strongly about it. Anyhow, she was kind enough to say that she thought she could find one for me.’

The end of the little story was not difficult to guess.

‘So she asked you in, found the photograph, and you were so pleased about it, you went away and forgot to take your drawing with you. Is that it?’

He agreed by jerking his head up and down in two, brief, brisk, little nods. He seemed quite glad to be relieved from the burden of further explanations. He had never let go of the drawing, and now he lifted it from his side and looked at it again. So did she.

‘Who’s it by? Or haven’t you made an attribution yet?’

He smiled. ‘Oh yes, but a very tentative one. I think it may turn out to be by the same man who painted that.’

He waved his hand, the forefinger extended, towards the ‘Venus with the Fan’.

For the first time she took a keen interest in the drawing.

He handed it to her.

‘But this,’ she exclaimed, ‘isn’t a bit like Tintoretto’s work. At least, not like those I know. They’re in black chalk, thick black chalk, and the body is almost always built up in little semi-circles or quarter-circles.’

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He made a congratulatory noise. She would not have been surprised if he had clapped her on the back, as he cried: 'You're right. It's not by Tintoretto.'

'What makes you think it has anything to do with my picture?'

She had come straight to the point, and it seemed to be the weak point in his case. He did not disguise it.

'I'm short of concrete evidence,' he admitted. 'All I can say is that in that painting,' – and again he indicated the picture with a flourish of his hand – 'I can perceive something which is akin to the early work of Tintoretto but somehow lacks the authentic Tintoretto touch.'

'You perceive it,' she said satirically, 'but does anyone else?'

'Give me time,' he protested, and bent his head over the drawing. 'I haven't even seen what there is on the back of this,' he grumbled. 'Probably nothing at all!' His face, however, was taut with frustration, and his fingers played round the broken glass within the frame as if their nervous and muscular energy was almost uncontrollable.

'Do,' she said, 'take it out if you want to.'

She felt a certain amount of curiosity herself.

'I mustn't,' he said. 'It might be a messy job. The nails are very small but I'm not sure I could get them out with a pen-knife.'

All the same, he produced the pen-knife and set to work. He loosened the backing and then turned the picture over, and tried to wrench out one of the pieces of the cracked glass. He cut his finger, and swore, and then apologised.

She wanted to laugh but dare not. At the same time, she felt suddenly tender towards him. From the bathroom she

brought a little box of strips of dressing fastened to pink adhesive.

He said: 'Thank you,' and made to take the dressings from her.

'Be careful. You'll get blood over everything.'

It was not such a bad cut as all that and she needed a few seconds to realise that what he was afraid of was staining – not her carpet or her furniture or her frock or even his own clothes – it was the drawing he was concerned about.

'Better let me do it.'

He submitted but he would not be led away to running water. He was too impatient. The result was that, when his finger was securely bound, his hands remained sticky with surplus blood, and grudgingly he went away to wash them.

When he returned, she had extricated the remaining glass and, using a small pair of pincers, removed the few small nails which held the backing in place.

She handed him the frame so that he could have, what he so obviously longed for, the sole and exclusive privilege of finishing the little job. Quite sincerely she hoped he would not be disappointed with what he found.

First the mount had to be lifted out, then the frame set aside. The mount had a window cut in it, with a bevelled edge, the same shape but slightly smaller than the paper. When James Hogan turned the mount over, he saw, and Eleanor Kent saw, that there was indeed another drawing, also in red chalk, on the reverse side. She glanced at his face and from his expression concluded that his hopes had come to nothing. However, what he disliked

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proved to be the way the paper had been fastened, along each side, with adhesive, to the back of the mount.

'Barbarians!' he said.

By that time he was examining the drawing thus revealed. It was of a child, not more than three or four years old, unclothed, lying prone on its front, with the forearms supporting the weight of head and chest, and the two hands forming a cup under the chin. As a study from life, it was, Eleanor thought, charming, but traditional, done with the skill which comes from schooling and practice, rather than an original perception realised on paper.

James Hogan seemed to be enraptured. The newly found drawing yielded him a vivid pleasure which she could see was emotional but possibly had some intellectual source. She remembered the correct phraseology to use.

'Is it,' she enquired, seriously, even anxiously, 'the same hand?'

'Oh yes,' Hogan replied, without a suspicion that she might be hiding behind the solemnity of her manner a hint of ridicule. 'There can't be any question about that, can there?'

If she had offered an opinion, he would have paid no attention to it, but he needed encouragement, so she gave him a still quite serious smile. He turned the drawing over in his hand, so that the sketches of an almost nude woman became visible again.

'The same hand,' he declared with conviction, 'and it's the hand of Giuseppe Porta Salviati. Mind you' – and he twirled the drawing, in its mount, so that the little boy lying on his tummy came uppermost once more – 'this

one, of the kid, is easy to spot. It's in one of Porta's recognised styles. There isn't much modelling but, as you see, what there is is done in a kind of pink wash. Either he put in chalk-strokes and then spread them with a wet brush, or more probably, he had a little pot of rough paste made from red chalk and water and used it the way other people used grey or brown water colour washes with pen and ink.'

'I'll take your word for it. You're lucky, Mr Hogan. You've got two drawings where you thought you had bought only one.'

He seemed to take that sort of thing for granted, but he explained that the drawing had, almost certainly, been bought by the owner of the shop in Bute Street already in its frame and behind glass.

'I'm sure,' said he, scowling, 'that somebody else, some miserable little dealer or badly brought up collector, fastened the paper to the back of the mount.'

The drawing should, it seemed, have been lightly attached, along one side only, to the under part of a hinged mount; the upper part of this mount would have the window cut in it and protect the drawing well enough, whether it was kept in a frame or not.

'I shall have a beast of a job,' he complained, 'getting rid of all that sticky stuff without damaging the paper.'

Her husband had been a 'pictures man' and never professed much interest in drawings. She perceived that she was ignorant of many things which a drawings man, such as James Hogan, would consider elementary. Nor did she yet know whether he was satisfied with the drawing he had just discovered on the reverse side of the other or, as she had feared, disappointed. She asked him.

He turned on her a face almost physically enlarged with astonishment.

'But this is it! Don't you see?'

She did not.

'I must be very stupid,' she suggested.

He would not have that.

'It's my fault. I'm so used to dealing with this sort of thing that I'm apt to forget it's strange to other people.'

What he saw in the little chalk drawing of a child lying full length with his head propped on his hands was a preliminary study for a part of the 'Venus with the Fan' painting. In such a pose, the child might be reading, or pretending to read, a book open before him.

'But,' she protested, 'there's no book in this drawing, and look, in the picture, the boy with the book isn't lying down at all.'

James Hogan did not bother to check the reference.

'I know. But you have to remember how a painter goes to work. Or at least, how painters used to go to work. He would make large numbers of drawings before he was ready to start. He might spend weeks and months on the drawings. They weren't all carefully done, to be more or less copied in paint later on. Most of them were sketches. Some would be sketches of the whole composition, others would be of parts of it. For trees, flowers, hills in the distance, buildings, anything which did not move very much, it was fairly easy to go out at a suitable time and make a drawing which was, in effect, a record of actual appearances. But when it comes to people, people who move about, it's not so easy. The painter had to try this pose and that pose, and from different angles. And he could not

make up a composition, a design for the whole painting, and then try to fit figures into it. He would experiment simultaneously with drawings for the whole composition and drawings of the principal figures.'

Her objection remained. 'Very well, Mr Hogan, somebody has made a drawing of a little boy lying down and I grant you he might be reading a book. But I don't see that you have proved any connection with the painting?'

He put out a forefinger, which, as she had noticed before, though it was not exactly stubby, was by no means long, thin and sensitive. He pointed it at a number of chalk marks, obviously done in haste, one overlapping another, which surrounded the drawing of the boy. She had thought of them as doodles and smears.

'Look!' he said. 'There's the book. If you can't make it out as a book, you can see that what it's propped against is a tree with untrimmed shoots round the base. Exactly as in the painting.'

She had no need to confirm the resemblance: once she was told that book and tree and shoots were there in the drawing, they suddenly became visible.

His forefinger moved across the paper.

'And here,' he claimed, 'you can see one, two, and three first sketches of the boy kneeling on one knee, just as he is in the picture.' The forefinger came to rest. 'It's the merest indication, of course, but this is the pose Porta used in the painting and almost from the same point of view.'

He had given her a lot to think about, and she could not make a start on the thinking while he was with her. She ought to think about him too, for, while she liked him, if only because he wasn't smooth, she felt that she

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ought to be on guard against him. He was an intruder. He had come, uninvited, or invited only in reply to his own suggestion, into her life at a most inconvenient time, when she had decided, but could not yet speak of it openly, to part with the 'Venus' picture for its full value in money.

She decided she would prefer to know, if she could find out, the worst that he could do to her.

'Isn't it,' she asked, cleansing her voice of any irony she felt, 'rather a coincidence that you should have just bought a drawing which, you say, is not only by the same man who, you say, painted my picture, but is actually a study for it?'

He did not take up the word 'coincidence', but found an alternative.

'It was, I admit, a bit of luck, finding this on the back of the drawing. But front and back, it's the same hand at work and I reckon I deserve full marks for liking the drawing in the first place, liking it enough to want to buy it, and realising that it is drawn in a Florentine, or Roman-Florentine, style applied to a Venetian subject.'

He wasn't a man to undervalue his own achievements!

'Very well,' she said, tartly. 'What I'd like to know is, are you telling me that my picture is by Porta, not by Tintoretto?'

He was silent for two or three seconds before he answered, and even then, his answer was qualified and lacking its usual forthrightness.

'I'm convinced, Mrs Kent. Whether I can convince other people is a different problem. It's only once in a blue moon that an attribution can be positively proved. It's nearly always a matter of opinion.'

That was honest. She approved of him. She liked him, She smiled at him. She remembered that she knew a little Latin. She gave him the benefit of it: '*Quot homines tot sententiae.*'

'Yes,' he said, 'but some opinions are worth more than others. They're not necessarily the ones which get the most attention.'

She felt fine. She was well and happy and interested but she needed all her wits about her to deal with this man. In business it was sometimes profitable to make a *volte face* without warning.

'Suppose,' she said, 'someone, someone with authority, were to come along and look at the picture and the drawing together and say: Yes, I agree, the same artist did both – but the artist was Tintoretto.'

'That's impossible,' Hogan retored. 'The style, the actual technique of drawing, is too different. Although – wait a minute. I'm not so sure.'

He was an honest man. She could, had they known each other longer, have given him a hug, a sisterly hug, because he was honest in his mind and put the truth before everything.

'One of the great difficulties about old drawings and about finding a convincing attribution, is that a change of medium often seems to transform a man's style. In painting it is much easier: a man's brushwork remains pretty constant, at least over a number of years. But for drawings, reed pens, quills, styluses, metal points, pure chalk and chalk mixed with gums, charcoal, several kinds of inks, and what we should now call watercolours were used.'

He was, Eleanor thought, no doubt an enthralling lecturer, as Barbara had reported, but she was, for the moment at least, more interested in the fate of her picture (a subject not to be spoken of, therefore not to be thought of) than in the history of draughtsmanship.

'Now Tintoretto,' he said, 'so far as I know, or as I believe anyone knows, never used red chalk. It was not a popular medium with Venetian artists. But I can't deny, though some people would, the possibility that Tintoretto did make red chalk drawings, and even that some of them survived but are not recognised as by him.'

She was a negotiator. She knew when she had gained an advantage. She decided to make his admission quite explicit.

'So if you should succeed in proving that your drawing was made in preparation for my painting it still would not prove that the painting is not by Tintoretto?'

'That's true but——'

It was all she needed from him and the argument had no further interest for her. She cut him short in order to thank him and offer him a drink. She rather went out of her way to be nice to him because, although the time he had chosen to air his theories was most awkward for her, he was an honest man and meant no harm. There was a flaw in his argument, but when it was pointed out to him he neither lost his temper nor pretended that the flaw did not exist. Such people, she knew, were rare.

She did not want him to go, and it pleased her to think that he, for his part, enjoyed talking with her even when the subject was not the one which so obviously he found absorbing, pictures and drawings. Not until he had said,

on three separate occasions, 'I really must be off,' did he take his departure.

She thought about him, after he had left, and while she was eating her evening meal, alone, with the evening papers. When Barbara telephoned from the country, after each had assured the other that all was well, she mentioned James Hogan's visit to collect his drawing.

Barbara said: 'I thought he'd turn up for it sooner or later.'

'Didn't he telephone while I was away?'

'No,' said Barbara flatly.

That was a bit odd. She said so, and Barbara took offence.

'What do you mean by that?'

She hastened to apologise and declare that she had meant only what she had said.

At the other end of the line Barbara said nothing. Unnerved by the long silence, her mother assured her: 'Darling, I am not being inquisitive. Anyhow, I rather like the man.'

Again Barbara kept silence.

'Don't *you*?' her mother asked.

'I don't think about him,' said Barbara. 'He's got another woman.'

It was a nasty, a vulgar, a repulsive expression!

'How do you know?'

'He told me.'

It was stupid, and rude, of him to offer his confidences to an eighteen-year-old girl and not impart the slightest hint to a woman of his own age who, when one came to think about it, had put up with quite a lot from him.

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'It's a secret,' Barbara continued, 'so don't talk about it to anyone else.'

Did the girl imagine she had nothing better to do than gossip about a man she had met only twice?

The word 'Tuesday' was mentioned, and with a shock Eleanor realised that Hogan had visited the flat on the day Miss Henderson was absent. Before she could speak, Barbara interrupted: 'If you must have that sort of mind, Mother, better keep it to yourself. Anyhow, he wasn't in the place more than a few minutes and all he's interested in is that painting and his precious drawing and——'

'And what?'

'I told you.'

Well, that was that. There was no point in taking any further interest in James Hogan.

A Late Call

When he heard that Eleanor Kent had returned to London, William Savoy went to see her, taking with him a bunch of roses and compensating for the extravagance by walking to the bus stop in Knightsbridge, and walking again at the other end, despite a shower of rain. These sacrifices yielded him a handsome profit, for Eleanor announced that she had been thinking over the whole venture and was determined that he should not work on her behalf for nothing. What she proposed was that he should be paid ten per cent of whatever she received for the painting after the auctioneers had deducted their commission.

Savoy could not work it out precisely in his head, but he protested: 'My dear, that would reduce what you get by nearly twenty per cent.'

She chose to make quite a thing of it, until he let her see that he was offended by the implication that his interest in art was mercenary.

'I assure you, Eleanor, it never entered my head that——'

Three times she asserted that she believed entirely in his disinterestedness, and at last she was persuaded to reduce her offer to one of five per cent, payable after she received the auctioneers' cheque.

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There were a lot of details to discuss but nothing important to communicate: the situation had not changed; everything was in train and there was nothing to do but wait until the first public announcement was made. He did not forget to ask, because it was necessary for him, as organiser of the venture, to make sure that every contingency was taken into account: 'I suppose you haven't been bothered by that fellow Hogan and his fancy theories?'

'Mr Hogan? Oh yes, I have seen him. He came round to collect a drawing he had left here.' Her manner was off-hand but Savoy prided himself that he was not taken in by appearances.

'Do you mean to say the fellow was in your flat while you were abroad?'

The ill news came out piecemeal. Hogan had wheedled his way into the place and wheedled a photograph of the 'Venus' picture out of Barbara, who was not only a child and a fool but, of course, knew nothing about the forthcoming sale.

'When I die,' Savoy thought, intensively moved by compassion for himself, 'it will be tragically swift, at some dreadful moment like this, a moment of crisis and betrayal.'

'What's going on? What's the fellow up to?'

One of the times when he found himself disliking women most vehemently was when they tried to calm him down and he did not want to be calm. Eleanor Kent knew nothing of the aesthetics, the criticism, the history of painting, still less of the unstable, complicated and unpredictable markets in which pictures were bought and sold. She was involved in the matter only by a triple coincidence: because she had married a man called Claude

Kent, because Kent had in his blindness bought a pseudo-Titian, and because, by a chance in a million, under the Titian, obscured and forgotten, there happened to be one of the greatest Tintoretto compositions of all. These pranks of fortune gave her an important, indeed a decisive part in the venture, but they could not endow her with knowledge, insight or judgment.

‘What’s all this,’ Savoy demanded, ‘about a drawing?’

The answers he eventually got, after he had put a number of supplementary questions, added up, in his opinion, and the phrase was his also, to a farrago of nonsense. Even so, their import was alarming.

‘I shall have to look into this,’ he declared.

Eleanor Kent was not, perhaps, a fool, like her dead husband and her daughter, but she was only a woman, and he should not have allowed himself to be surprised by the blithe reassurance she offered.

‘You needn’t bother. I put it straight to Mr Hogan myself. He says his drawing is by somebody called Porta – I think I’ve got it right – but when I put it to him that that was only an opinion and, for all he or anyone else could prove, the drawing might be by Tintoretto, he was unable to deny it.’

‘I’ve come across this sort of thing before,’ Willie told her, feeling his years heavy on him. ‘This drawing will turn out to be one copied from the painting and done years after Tintoretto’s death. If Hogan were a scholar, instead of a tuppenny-hapenny journalist, he would have realised it already.’

The danger was that Hogan, moving round four or five days a week among the galleries and the salerooms and

the museums, might talk about his drawings, as collectors were apt to talk about their new acquisitions, that is to say vaingloriously, and – because he was associating it with a famous painting – people who liked to fancy themselves in the know might start a bout of malicious gossip about the ‘Venus’ picture which, accumulating during the next month or two, might bring down the price at the sale. A spoken slander, a written libel, could be dealt with expeditiously and in public, but gossip, especially privileged and informed gossip, as William Savoy well knew, was almost impossible to stifle. Hogan and his wretched drawing might drive the whole venture to disaster.

Savoy began to plan a campaign, in which he figured as a discreet, tolerant, elder statesman working behind the scenes to stave off this disaster and incidentally to teach a young man (for at forty, or whatever he was, Hogan could be reckoned still young) a much needed lesson. On Monday, he put off any decisive action, and pretended that he needed a little longer to prepare himself for the conflict. On the Tuesday he began, reluctantly, to search for Hogan, who had an entry in the telephone directory: at half past eleven in the morning the bell rang and rang and no one answered. At the office of the *Reformer*, Savoy was told that Mr Hogan had not yet put in an appearance and it was uncertain when he might be expected.

‘It all depends,’ a young woman’s voice explained, ‘whether he had any exhibitions or anything else to write about for tomorrow’s paper.’

He left a message, requesting Hogan to ‘call him back’, but he had to go out somewhere to dine that

evening, and so, perhaps had Hogan, for when he dialled Hogan's number, at ten o'clock, again he got no reply.

Anxiety must have wearied him, for no sooner was he in bed than he fell asleep. It was rare for him to be able to lose consciousness so quickly and smoothly, and some dim appreciation of this natural blessing must, he afterwards thought, have coloured his dream. It was a dream, that relaxed the muscular tension and nervous unease out of his body. He quitted the dream with the utmost reluctance and only because the telephone bell at his bedside would not stop ringing. There was no other way to put an end to the hideous disturbance except to lift the receiver.

A voice said: 'I hope I'm not disturbing you too late?'

The dream was over. He switched on the light and saw that the time was only ten minutes to eleven.

'Who is it?'

The voice gave the name of James Hogan.

It was an abominable trick, in the worst possible taste, to catch him, glowing and gratified from the unrealities of the dream, at a disadvantage.

'You left a message,' said Hogan's voice, 'asking me to call you.'

The campaign was about to open. This was the enemy. Until he judged that the moment for giving battle had arrived, Savoy resolved to follow an old precept and treat the enemy with punctilious courtesy.

'Very kind of you to telephone, Mr Hogan. I rather wanted to have a talk with you.'

'All right. When?'

That was a sign of the over-confidence of youth: a

clever man would have asked not when but why, and a still cleverer one would have made it an indirect question.

‘As soon as is convenient to you, Mr Hogan. Tomorrow, if possible.’

Perhaps that sounded a little too eager? To offset any ill-effect, he suggested that Hogan might care to lunch or dine with him at his club.

‘I’m afraid not,’ Hogan replied. ‘I’m booked for lunch and I’ll be working in Fleet Street in the evening.’

When it is urgently needed, a man of superior mind can always produce an idea. William Savoy did so now.

‘Mr Hogan, there’s that private view at the Tate tomorrow. Won’t you be there?’

There was a pause before Hogan answered. ‘Yes, but not early, I’m afraid.’

‘I quite agree, Mr Hogan. But how about – let’s say half past three?’

Again the fellow kept him waiting before he agreed.

The Exhibition Rooms at the Tate would be crowded and he did not want to be seen exchanging more than a casual word or two with Hogan: what he hoped to do was to take the young man aside and lead him to one of the public galleries, the Pre-Raphaelite one would do, where they would probably be alone. There, in the course of a few minutes, the fellow could be put in his place, gently but firmly, and any potential danger nipped in the bud. Savoy returned to his sleep, relishing the last phrase and half convinced that he had just invented it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Private View

'Heavens,' she said, 'I haven't been there for years!'

Eleanor Kent was a Londoner by birth and upbringing, and to her the Tate Gallery was one of those places which attracted so many tourists from the provinces and abroad that there was a diminished pleasure in visiting them, or even in considering a visit to them. St Paul's, the Abbey, the Tower, the British Museum and the National Gallery were always, figuratively, on the Londoner's door-step. One was always meaning to look in, one never quite did. The Tate Gallery had the further disadvantage that it was out of the way and, to Eleanor's mind, almost inaccessible. Except that it was a repository of painting and sculpture, with which they were both tenuously connected, the Tate seemed a very odd place for James Hogan to invite her to.

She hardly knew what to say, and what she did hear herself say struck her as rather silly and, she hoped, unworthy of her. If he had written his invitation, instead of making it over the telephone, she would have had time to think. She needed time to think about him because of a question she could not put to him. The question was, why did he bother her, and bother about her, if he was carrying on a love affair with another woman? Was it

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because the other woman could not spare the time to go about with him?

Well, it was not easy for Eleanor Kent either to loosen herself from the demands of her work, simply because a man she hardly knew had an invitation card to the opening of an exhibition of abstract paintings.

‘What time is it for?’

‘Twelve noon.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Hogan, but I shan’t be free then.’

‘But that’s only the ceremony, the speech-making. We don’t have to be there for that. We could go earlier.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Or we could go later?’ he suggested, not so casually that she failed to perceive that this had been his intention all along. ‘And perhaps you would have luncheon with me first?’

To her it sounded suspiciously as though his love affair were wearing itself out and he had begun to look around for a replacement. Silently she made a promise to herself, though it was cast in the form of a reproof to Hogan, ‘You’d better look somewhere else,’ was what she thought.

Aloud she made one, two, three sounds, inarticulate, not verbal sounds, but not without meaning either, for they indicated, to the man at the other end of the telephone connection, that she was considering ways and means. Then she stayed silent while, her mind in a chaos of self-criticism, she wondered what she was going to do about a situation she ought never to have allowed to occur.

‘I’m very busy. I really can’t be away from my office for long, Mr Hogan.’

‘But you will come?’

If she was making a fool of herself, he did not sound the kind of man who would see an advantage in her weakness and exploit it. When she spoke, she spoke severely, as if admonishing him for a presumption.

'I could meet you at one o'clock. But I must be back by half past two. I'm afraid you may have to go on to the Tate without me.'

She was the one who was exploiting an advantage, laying down conditions and implying that it was a privilege merely to know her. The poor man had asked her to accompany him to a private view, had been side-tracked into inviting her to luncheon first, and now was being told that she would take the lunch but to hell with the private view. Some people would call her a bitch – but not James Hogan. He thanked her and it sounded as though he meant it.

Her private and personal life was beginning to interest Eleanor Kent again, almost as though she were a girl. It had begun to take shape too. Everything in the present and the immediate future was tending towards a culmination two months ahead when, with a great deal of publicity and excitement, the 'Venus' picture would be sold at auction and she would become a rich woman – comparatively rich, that is, but rich enough to give her an illusion of entering a fairy tale, near the start, in which she was the heroine destined to live happily ever after. The fact that she could share the secret with nobody, except Willie Savoy, who did not count, gave it all a girlish, if not childish quality which sometimes enchanted her, and at other times was embarrassing.

The day of the sale, not yet announced and not to be

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mentioned, lay far ahead like a peak in the Himalayas, to be scaled only at the end of an elaborately prepared time schedule. The route would be covered by spaced-out stages, and stage one, to her, was her appointment to lunch with James Hogan. Even that was approached by graduated sub-stages on successive days. On Friday afternoon, within an hour of her arrival from Zürich, he had telephoned, and then arrived, post haste, to collect his drawing. On the Saturday, she did not see him or hear from him, but, coping with Willie, she had been compelled to talk about Hogan in order to allay poor Willie's fears. It was on the Sunday, in the evening, that he had telephoned suggesting that they might go together to the Tate Gallery on the Wednesday. She had made conditions before she accepted.

On the Monday, in the intervals of work, she discovered from the newspapers that the Exhibition at the Tate was regarded as of international importance. Old, half-forgotten memories told her that the private view was likely to be grander than most and probably a social occasion. She felt rather sorry for herself because, yielding to her sense of duty, she had declared that she must return to her office by half past two. On the Tuesday, she went to see the managing director of the firm she worked for, and told him that she had a chance to take first look at a collection of abstract paintings which might conceivably influence a new trend in textile designs in Great Britain.

'Some of the Germans are experimenting already,' she said. 'So are the Swiss. It's just a question whether it takes on here after this show.'

'And would,' the managing director enquired, 'a day or two make any difference?'

She was prepared for that and retorted: 'No, but I do like to be first on the spot.'

He laughed and said: 'Of course you can go, Mrs Kent. I hope you enjoy yourself.'

It was nice to work for nice people, but it would be nicer still when she had lots of money in the bank and could put in her resignation. That Tuesday evening, she got out the blue frock bought in Milan and not yet worn in London. The pattern with which it was printed ought to look well at an exhibition of abstract paintings. Then she began to worry lest it should not stand up to the comparison. She thought, also, that some people might consider it too 'young' for her to wear. She looked at it again the following morning but put it away. It would not be fair to her escort to run risks. She picked out a frock that looked almost like a suit, so trimly was it cut: it was of bottle green. She put on a new pair of stockings, but played safe with shoes which though not old were comfortable. The frock was of a kind which needed only one piece of jewellery, but that had to be large and placed precisely. It all took time and she was a quarter of an hour late reaching her office.

She was nervous, but after the first ten minutes enjoyed the luncheon. The restaurant was strange to her, not over-staffed or over-decorated, and therefore not much used by people eating out on expense accounts. To her it was something of a novelty to be entertained by a man who was not doing it for a business purpose.

He asked questions about her job, and she told him a little about her trip to Switzerland and Italy, mentioning

that she had had dinner on the Rome Express with Peter Paul Robinson. She would have done better to say nothing, because of what Peter Paul had said to her. From him she had concealed her intention, now being put into practical effect, of selling the 'Venus' picture at auction. James Hogan similarly had to be kept out of the secret. On the other hand, she had received what amounted to a firm offer to buy the picture by private treaty and resell with an understanding that the profit be shared, from Peter Paul, and this, for her own sake, she was keeping back even from Willie Savoy. She would have preferred, however, to be entirely candid, without any mental reservations, in her dealings with James Hogan.

Trying to lead the conversation towards his interests, she mentioned a newly published biography and asked: 'Did you know Berenson?'

'Lord, no. Why should I?'

She opened her eyes at that. She thought, and said, that all art historians had sought the personal acquaintance of Bernard Berenson, the first, the greatest, the very prototype of the genus.

'That's the legend,' Hogan retorted, quite scornfully. 'And it's as much a myth as a legend.'

What he held against Berenson was not so much the notorious fact that the scholar had made a fortune in the employment of a dealer as certain of Berenson's books. Hogan conceded that 'the man was honest with himself on occasion' – the 'Sketch for a Self Portrait' apparently indicated this – but he was also, in Hogan's opinion, a poseur who struck attitudes to impress himself and had bluffed the whole art world, and such part of the literary

world as took an interest, with theorisings about 'life-enhancing' art.

'What does it mean – life-enhancing?'

'Nothing,' said Hogan. 'Nothing at all. It's a pretentious label put on things that appealed to his own taste. Berenson was not only a humbug, he was fatuous.'

The last word was pronounced like a fulmination.

Whether he meant to or not, and she did not think it was a conscious intention, Hogan impressed her in two different ways: he could be quite formidable in displeasure, and quite charming coming out of it.

His moods changed very fast. Towards the end of luncheon he told a story, a mere anecdote, about something which had happened in Fleet Street, and in the course of it, he reported that somebody had addressed him as 'Jim'.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'is that what they call you?'

'Yes, but I'd rather you didn't.'

It was the cruellest and most unexpected snub she had ever received. To make it worse he was looking straight at her. 'What a fool I was,' she thought, 'and at my age, to walk into this. If they gave out medals for the stiff upper lip,' she thought, 'I'd be entitled to half a dozen!'

'What I was hoping,' he said, slowly and earnestly, 'is that you might, if it's not presumptuous of me, call me by my first name just as it is – James.'

He seemed to have no idea that only a few seconds before he had almost – and, it seemed now, without intention – made her cry!

She was the one who was slow on the uptake. The reason he did not want her to call him 'Jim' must be because that was what his wife had called him.

She decided to take a risk.

'Was it happy,' she asked, 'your marriage?'

'Yes. Very happy.'

He looked across the table at her and it was now for her to say, widow speaking to widower, that hers also had been a happy marriage. She said nothing. It was better, with him, not to pretend.

Without harrying the waiter, he had conducted her through most of the luncheon reasonably fast, and when the coffee was brought, he said: 'Don't worry, I'll see you get back to your office by half past two.'

She had not spared one thought for the time and she had forgotten to tell him that she would, after all, be able to go to the exhibition.

She told him now – and he was less pleased about it than she had expected. 'It doesn't matter a bit,' she said. 'You've found someone else to go with you. Anyhow, thank you for asking me first.'

Her enquiries, she told herself sardonically, ought to have been directed not to his dead wife but to the other woman, his mistress or whatever she was.

'It's not that,' he said – and for a moment she feared he was answering her unspoken sarcasm – 'but I've promised to see Mr Savoy there. However, that's not till half past three.'

Willie sometimes got a 'mister' before his name and sometimes didn't: it seemed to depend on Hogan's mood. It surprised her to hear that Willie was to attend an exhibition of contemporary art. Perhaps her surprise showed in her face, and her curiosity also.

'I imagine he's going not because of the pictures but

because of the people. 'They're expecting quite a lot of the West End aristocracy, topped up by a duke, some ambassadors, of course, and a couple of millionaires.'

He did not care for Willie Savoy's form of snobbery, but he also was a snob in his own way. She hoped she was well enough turned out not to let him down before the duke and the ambassadors.

'Savoy,' he said, as if replying to a question, 'wants to see me. It's not the other way around.'

At last she understood. The trouble with Willie was that he would not take a telling. James Hogan had a right to know, so she informed him that she had disclosed to her adviser the fact that there was a drawing in existence which might be considered a preparatory drawing for the 'Venus' picture.

'Did I do wrong?'

He shook his head. It was the sort of question which a chivalrous man can answer only one way. He went further than chivalry. 'I consider myself, Eleanor, bound to tell Savoy before I publish anything.'

He seemed to her the very soul of scrupulous consideration for others, and she was so pleased with him that she babbled on, chiding Willie Savoy. 'He had no right to be bothering you, just now. I told him that you admitted that if your drawing is connected with the picture, it doesn't affect the attribution.'

'Doesn't it?'

'Well, I asked you myself and you said there is no way of proving that Tintoretto did not make the drawing also. Didn't you?'

He could not deny it. He was angry because he

could not deny it. He kept his anger under control.

‘The trouble is,’ he told her, ‘you want to interpret the facts one way and I think they ought to be interpreted another way altogether. You have a remote possibility on your side, but I must warn you that all the probability is on my side. Tell me, if Mr Savoy wants to see the drawing and form his own opinion, you wouldn’t object?’

Why should she? Willie was committed to her side and moreover he stood to gain considerably. She would have liked to tell Hogan – she must learn to think of him as ‘James’ – about the forthcoming sale, but she had pledged herself to say nothing to anyone. He would learn soon enough, and when he did he would undoubtedly see her point of view and see also that his problematic little drawing, interesting in itself, was only an irritating irrelevance.

When the taxi arrived at the Tate Gallery, there was quite a concourse of important-looking men and expensively dressed women, clearly not members of the general public, moving up the steps. The Exhibition Rooms, opening off the Sculpture Hall, were guarded by uniformed attendants demanding to see invitation cards before allowing anyone inside. She had never belonged to Society and she had dropped out of the world of art historians and museum officers. There were among the crowd some faces she recognised because they appeared so often in newspaper photographs, but there were very few who recognised her. It was different with James Hogan. The exhibits, on canvas or board, unframed, set out round the walls and on tall screens, were only intermittently visible and he got little chance to examine them: people called to him, some bowed, some waved a hand, and many came

up to talk. Those who wanted to talk often did not realise that he was not alone and were compelled to make embarrassed apologies to her.

At length he said: 'Look, I must spend a few minutes on these blasted things, and try and get hold of a few photographs. Let me find someone to talk to you?'

What old-fashioned and delightful courtesy! One effect he had on her was to bolster up her self-confidence – or was it, perhaps, her vanity?

She thanked him but said: 'Don't worry about me. And anyhow, there *is* someone I know over there.'

James Hogan turned to inspect this acquaintance and she fancied she saw in his eye, as he stared across the room, an incipient gleam of proprietorial jealousy. She was amused by it: she positively enjoyed seeing it there. The gleam vanished as soon as he saw who it was she had referred to.

'Fancy Peter Paul turning up! It must be true that they're expecting millionaires this afternoon. Or has he got hold of them already?'

The three people that Peter Paul Robinson was entertaining at the moment were the duke, a duchess long divorced from another duke, and Willie Savoy. Even at a distance of twenty feet one could almost see Willie palpitating with gratification. Peter Paul saw her, gave her a bow and a smile that was evidently intended to promise that he would be with her as soon as he could. His glance, however, was for the most part wandering the other way, over a ducal shoulder, to the anteroom by which new arrivals entered the exhibition. Clearly, the millionaires were yet to come.

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Left to herself, Eleanor remembered that she was present because she had vamped up an excuse for coming, and she spent four or five minutes trying to memorise those of the abstract paintings which seemed to her most characteristic of the new trend of popular taste. Her eyes and her mind were both practised in such memorising, but, as always, she found that abstract designs were, inherently, hard to distinguish and easy to confuse in memory.

When she freed herself from this task, she saw that Hogan had moved into the end gallery and hoped that he would be free soon. She looked the other way and saw Peter Paul Robinson gracefully detach himself from the duke and the divorced duchess and move towards a small group, so dull of face that they might well be millionaires, which had paused on the threshold of the Exhibition Rooms. Several other people then moved in on the duke and the duchess, separating them, possibly to their relief, and from the *melée* there emerged the red dyed hair of Willie Savoy. He saw her. He could not help seeing her. He came straight across the room.

His pale face was almost rosy with pleasure derived from the company he had so recently kept. He could not have looked more pleased with his good fortune were he bowing himself out backwards from wherever it was in Buckingham Palace that the Queen clapped a ceremonial sword on the shoulders of new made knights.

‘How charming to see you, my dear Eleanor,’ he said loudly, ‘and what a becoming hat!’

Give him credit for that: it was more than James Hogan had noticed.

Her took her by the elbow and, smiling, grimacing, bowing to the right and left, led her away to the ante-room, and beyond the entrance, to a corner, where a group of abstract water colours was being ignored.

'I had no idea you took an interest in this sort of thing?'

'And you? Do you like them?' she said.

He lowered his voice, and chuckled as he commented: 'Ghastly, aren't they? Almost as bad as the Permanent Collection here. I've only come for one reason. And do you know what that is?'

His big face peered down at her, roguish with knowingness and mischief. 'I'm going to have a talk later on with that fellow Hogan.'

She looked at poor Willie, and decided it would be pointless not to tell him.

'I came with Mr Hogan,' she said.

She could have sworn that his face went two shades paler.

'Whatever for?'

'Because he asked me. And don't look at me like that, Willie. I have not told him anything I ought not to.'

His self-assurance returned quickly. After all, he was a man who had been seen in public colloquy with a duke and a duchess, not married to each other, and not related, and therefore doubly ducal.

James Hogan came in search of her.

To Willie he said: 'Never mind the time. I've finished and I'm sure you've nothing important to do.'

The Peacock Strut

When Savoy and Hogan left the suite of rooms at the Tate Gallery in which the private view was being held Eleanor Kent went with them. Savoy, she could see, would have preferred her to stay behind but she told herself that she had some right to be present: it was her picture they were to confer about, and they were more likely to keep the peace if she were present.

The two men agreed (and she took this as a good omen) ~~that~~ out of the thirty or more galleries the one most likely to be empty of people would be the one where Pre-Raphaelite paintings were displayed. Each man thought he knew where this gallery lay: each then lost confidence and deferred to the other. By that time they had all three crossed the great Sculpture Hall into a gallery where many of the canvases were familiar to her from reproductions. She picked out Augustus John's portrait of W. B. Yeats, the Stanley Spencer Resurrection paintings, the Sickert 'Ennui' and Epstein's bronze head of Albert Einstein. Savoy and Hogan had gone ahead of her, making for the end of the room. When she caught up with them, Hogan shot out an arm, the forefinger extended, and said in a loud voice: 'That's about the best thing Duncan Grant ever did.'

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It was an opinion not a criticism, but the people in the gallery were lucky – it might easily have turned into one of his disquisitions.

The next room they entered was very large and most of the paintings in it were large too. Next came a room full of Blakes and a bigger room containing a lot of eighteenth century portraits. There were no Pre-Raphaelites to be seen, and suddenly they arrived in the Entrance Hall, only a few yards from where they had started.

Hogan had lots of excuses. He said the place was a labyrinth and one room in it looked much the same, and just as clumsily ornate, as another. On top of that, it was always being re-arranged.

‘It never has been satisfactory,’ said Savoy in a whisper. ‘Administrative troubles ever since I can remember.’

In the middle of the Entrance Hall was the big four-sided desk where photographs, post-cards, catalogues and books were sold. Crowds of visitors, many foreign, most of them young and earnest, thronged round the desk, making choices. Having decided it would take too long to enquire there, Hogan beckoned and she followed, with Willie Savoy, into a side gallery which turned out to be filled with Sickerts.

‘A wonderful character,’ Willie declared and was about to tell, by no means for the first time, the story of a visit he had paid to the aged Sickert at Bath. Hogan might have done better, in his own interest to have become a listener then, but he also had opinions to air. ‘Sickert? More character than ability. Mixed mud with his colours and couldn’t draw.’

Poor Willie, who never quarrelled with established

reputations unless and until he believed they were on the wane, looked flabbergasted. Hogan, however, did find something to admire, a head and shoulders portrait of a young woman, in profile, wearing a big ornamental hat. It was by Louis Anquetin. It was hung in the doorway between two rooms. Hogan developed a theory, to which Willie was not unsympathetic, that Anquetin was unfairly treated by twentieth century critics because, like Chirico decades later, he had opted out of the then prevailing 'modern' movement.

Eleanor found another Anquetin, hung similarly in another doorway, not far distant. It was a Rubensesque study for 'The Three Graces'. The two small pictures, she thought, might provide a favourable meeting ground for temperaments so diverse as Savoy's and Hogan's: both of them, she felt, believed that something had gone wrong with art when it broke completely away from the Renaissance tradition.

'Couldn't you talk here?' she suggested.

They refused. They said there were far too many people about. She went to an attendant and asked the way to the Pre-Raphaelite pictures. The attendant told her that they were not on view, that gallery being closed for redecoration. She brought the news to Savoy and Hogan. They scowled at her as though she were to blame.

'I know,' Hogan exclaimed. 'What about those little Turner rooms? The ones with all the marble? And yes, you can see the portrait of old Joe Duveen himself,' he told Eleanor.

When at last they found the portrait, it was much as he had described it, installed in one of a number of rooms no

bigger than rooms in an ordinary house. The walls, about ten or twelve feet high, were hung with Turner water-colours, but in one corner, built into the wall, with green and black marble and gold lettering on a tablet, stood a 1908 portrait of a middle-aged man wearing mutton-chop whiskers, a tall linen collar and a pearl tie-pin. He was described as Sir Joseph Duveen, Donor of the Turner Wing. There was nothing, as Hogan quickly pointed out, to identify the painter. He led them to an adjoining room, no bigger, similarly decorated with green marble and parquet floors but hung with oil paintings, all by Turner.

'Typical of this place,' said Hogan. 'Three really first-class pictures.'

With the big envelope flapping in his hand, he indicated the Self-Portrait done when the painter was young, and two brilliantly coloured views of the Venetian lagoon. The other paintings she excluded from consideration by flapping the envelope.

Eleanor was glad to sit on the wooden bench, and consider the Turners which Hogan had dismissed. They were all attempts to render the coloured formlessness of sky and atmosphere, and again she understood why he had made a distinction. These had been of importance to Turner, and now were presumably of interest to students. As pictures, however, they were incomplete, unrealised, and therefore they did not communicate adequately what had been put into them.

Meanwhile, Hogan and Savoy had taken themselves off to Venice, but Venice two centuries before Turner. Hogan laid a photograph – she recognised it at a glance as of the 'Venus with the Fan' – on the seat beside her. He

then produced two smaller photographs from the big envelope.

'These are of my red chalk drawing. *Recto* first.'

'Very nice, Mr Hogan. But you surely do not seriously maintain that this is by Tintoretto?'

'Of course not. It's by Giuseppe Porta.'

Willie at once looked sceptical.

'I thought you'd feel like that about it,' said Hogan, talking, Eleanor felt, rather as though he were much the older man. 'You'll have to look up what they have at the Ashmolean before you make up your mind. However, the first thing is to realise that these are preliminary studies, using a rather different pose and from a different angle, for the Venus in the "Venus with the Fan".'

'A bit far-fetched,' said Willie.

'Can't you see it? Very well, now look at this. This is the *verso* of the same drawing.'

This time Willie took longer to make up his mind.

At length he said: 'It's nearer to Giuseppe Porta, although to convince me it would have to be vouched for by a really eminent authority. But what makes you think it's related to the picture?'

All the urbanity, all the cooings and deferences, the smiles and informal bows had ceased by this time. Eleanor was not sure that Hogan's self-assurance had not vanished with them. He conceded that the boy in the drawing, lying full length, was very different from the boy in the painting, but pointed to the doodled sketch of the book and the tree stump among the other sketches around the central drawing.

'Oh really, Mr Hogan! If there is any likeness, which I

doubt, it is surely mere coincidence? After all, Renaissance Italians were always drawing *bambini*, and now and again one pose is sure to come very close to another.'

Willie's manner was patronising. It often was. At other times he would be meek and self-depreciating, for he was a creature of up and down moods. Eleanor guessed that he had come to the meeting with Hogan in a state of apprehension, tormenting himself with the fear that he had made, in the most public way, a gross error by attributing the picture to Tintoretto. Now he had seen and heard the worst that could be argued against his attribution, and the evidence seemed to him so flimsy that he no longer worried. He was patronising towards Hogan now, but unmalicious. And Hogan? Hogan was taking it quietly and not, she perceived, with a touch of pride, doing or saying any of the regrettable things which a man not bred to the gentleman's code must have been tempted to do and say.

Hogan returned his photographs to the big brown envelope, and they all walked, one after another, she first, into a long room, with white and blue Whistlers on the wall, which led, like a corridor, into a room full of Sargent portraits. At the far side there was a way out on to a landing.

'Isn't that,' Willie Savoy asked, suspiciously, 'the way to those new galleries?'

She had no idea. She turned to Hogan, who was telling Savoy that his guess was a good one.

Willie stopped and excused himself from further attendance. To Hogan he said good-bye politely, even benevolently, and to Eleanor he said, in a private voice: 'I'll be in touch with you tonight or tomorrow morning.'

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He turned and receded among the formal Edwardian clothes of the Sargents.

'What put him off?' she asked. 'What is there down those stairs that he didn't like?'

'Twentieth century stuff, mostly French. The galleries have only just been re-arranged.'

Looking out from the faded, post-Victorian decorations of the gallery in which they stood to the concrete landing on the other side of the open door she noticed an unornate but not ungraceful staircase, with a slender balustrade of red-brown wood. At the bottom of the descent she could see walls of unframed pictures vividly coloured.

'Come on,' cried Hogan. 'This is the best thing that's happened to the Tate since it was built.'

He had become a boyish enthusiast again, and she liked it. He touched her elbow and ushered her through the doorway ahead of him, but came abreast as they began the descent of the stairs. He clattered his shoes, almost dancing, on the treads.

'The curse of this place is that it's run by a committee. For every good acquisition they make, they take in four, five, six, a dozen duds, to placate those trustees who suffer from bad taste or no taste.'

He was livelier in talk than in print. She told him so.

'Oh well, I'm freer now. I can say just what I think to you.'

From a man who had not spared one kind word for her hat or her dress this counted, she supposed, as a compliment.

At the foot of the staircase, there began a sequence of small galleries, all artificially lighted because they were

underground, and all designed in the architectural style which, for her, would always be a reminder of the South Bank, the Festival of Britain Exhibition which had given a prophetic glimpse of how a new London might be rebuilt out of the bomb ruins. Milan was doing the job more flamboyantly, and Rotterdam more systematically, more coherently: even Canterbury, on its small scale, had stepped into the second half of the twentieth century more confidently than London.

She said this to James Hogan, who told her: 'You're right. They ought to have pulled the whole of the Tate down and started again.'

She flicked a few questions at him, wondering what was his general attitude towards paintings not yet even one century old. As she might have expected, he had no use for Chagall and Rouault. 'Can't draw!' he said. He spoke these two favourite words like a death sentence. The Braque he commended but with little interest. 'One Dufy,' he said, watching her out of the corner of his eye, to make sure she appreciated his apophthegm, 'is pretty, two is an excess.'

She wondered if he had used that in print or if he kept it in conversational reserve to impress women he wished to impress. She realised, quite suddenly, that from the moment she walked into the restaurant and saw him, already at the table, rising to his feet, he had been doing his damndest to make her either like him or admire him. The process was not so crude as her mental summary suggested, but it was fundamentally naïve all the same. It was an outcrop of boyishness in him, disarming and even endearing, but it meant that he was, with her, to some

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degree self-conscious and therefore not wholly at ease.

When, however, he looked at a picture, standing squarely in front of it and standing still, he concentrated so hard that not only did he lose his boyish self-displaying manner but, she had no doubt, he cut himself off from every conscious awareness of his surroundings – including her! This provided a respite in which she might be able to think of him objectively. He had allowed her a long look at himself in the role of a Londoner who knew his way about, who knew how to order a luncheon and pay a bill, who knew how to behave on a social occasion – the private view – a celebrity of sorts among other celebrities and celebrity-observers. He had let her observe that his opinions, however hastily expressed, were neither superficial nor conventional, and he had used poor Willie Savoy, timid, conformist and unoriginal, as a backcloth to ~~show~~^{show} up his own contrasting qualities. When Willie moved into the foreground and challenged him about his drawing, Willie, it seemed to her, had got the best of it, but there was something odd, still to be explained, about that. Possibly she was intended to be wondering about it now?

All in all, what James Hogan's behaviour put her in mind of was the strutting and spreading of feathers of a cock bird in the mating season. Instinct – or was she mistaking for instinct a suggestion he had deliberately implanted in her? – urged that he was not to be summed up as the sort of man which she knew other men called a womaniser. Nevertheless, he might have had love affairs. He might be involved with another woman even now? He had hardly left the flat after their second meeting, when she had been told, by her own daughter, in almost so many

words, that he belonged to some other woman. If that were true – and the report had come in the first place from his own lips – he had no right to behave as he had been behaving this day. The peacock and the fantail pigeon may flit from one hen to another, but a self-respecting woman demands something like constancy from a man who come courting. It was strange, Eleanor thought, that she had managed to keep this unknown other woman conveniently out of mind so long. That seemed to her now an unfastidious thing to do, and hypocritical also. Perhaps she wanted to be assured that the other woman had no real existence, was a product of a misunderstanding or of Barbara's adolescent romanticising? To obtain such an assurance she would have to put a question direct to James Hogan. She could not bring herself to do it.

Thought and feeling, not communicated, dispensing with words, make their own tempo. When she uncoiled her mind from its concentration, she saw James Hogan move, suddenly but smoothly, from one picture to another, and knew that not more than seven or eight seconds had gone by since she was last aware of his physical presence. He had left the Van Gogh 'Sunflowers' and was now looking at the Van Gogh 'Chair' – the yellow chair with the pipe on the seat. Both pictures had been reproduced in life-like colour millions of times, yet there he was, the art critic of the *Reformer*, staring first at one, then at the other, as though he had never before set eyes on them.

He moved at last and said, 'You mustn't miss these.'

He led her up to ten Picassos, arranged in a line along a single wall, starting with an early flower piece and ending with an abstract like a diagrammatic map.

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Confronted with the work of a master, one is expected to say something intelligent, but all that came from her was: 'I had no idea the Tate had so many.'

She could tell that he was about to begin one of his disquisitions, and the prospect intimidated her more than it pleased her. It intimidated her so much that she decided that what she needed and wished for above all was to be left alone for a time. Whatever he had to say about Picasso, he would say sooner or later. There was no blinking the fact that he was a bit of a talker. Any woman who was prepared to take him on, either as a husband or as a lover, would have to do a lot of listening. Nor was there going to be much variety of subject: it might go back as far as cave paintings and come forward as far as whatever the theory and practice of the 1960's was going to be, but the subject would be pictorial art. In the utter, private silence of her innermost mind, she admitted to herself that she loved him. At the moment, however, she needed to be alone.

Briskly, she said: 'Now you must go and so must I.'

He was taken off guard and she was glad that she had not left it to him to choose the exact time of parting. When they passed through the revolving door and out into the sunshine of the late afternoon, the Thames below them was a broad glitter of tiny dancing lights.

'Like a Guardi,' she said, 'but it's much warmer here than it was last week in Milan. And I heard Venice was colder still.'

'Who cares—in Venice!'

He was ahead of her, down the steps, moving towards a taxi.

'If only,' he called back, 'this were a gondola!'

But she did not want him to be romantic, not then. His intention, as she had already guessed, was that he should engage the taxi, and drop her at Queen's Gate on his way to the *Reformer* office. It was kind, and it was chivalrous, for it meant that he would pay the whole fare, but she did not wish to be alone with him in a taxi, not while he was in a mood to talk of gondolas, even though the sun was still well above the horizon.

She thanked him as she entered the cab but closed the door before he could follow. The window was down.

'When do I see you next?' he cried.

She pretended not to hear and the cab drove off, turning away from the river almost at once. She had behaved badly, and she could not tell why. She had yearned suddenly to be alone, and now she was alone, jolting gently on the taxi cushions through the Westminster streets and it gave her no satisfaction at all.

It will serve me right, she thought, bleakly, if I never hear from him again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Everybody Forgets

When James Hogan arrived at the *Reformer* offices he was in no mood to start the work he had come to do. Between him and Eleanor Kent something had gone wrong. It had gone wrong at a moment when he had planned to advance his suit to the point of open declaration. Something had gone wrong and he had no idea what it was. He was able to think only by spasms, chaotically and ponderously, each cogitation overladen with emotions of bewilderment and despair. In his fortieth year he found himself anachronistically thrown into one of the tempestuous crises of adolescence. Criteria vanished: nothing in the relationship between himself and Eleanor Kent could be judged adequately. for everything shifted, dissolved, merged, disintegrated, changed shape and changed proportion as it was examined in retrospect, while he himself, the examiner, seemed to have become as unstable, evanescent and ambiguous as any of the events he attempted to bring under scrutiny.

For a time he escaped from his own uncertainties into the task, not wholly a matter of routine, of composing from his pencilled notes a notice of the exhibition he had attended during the afternoon. He drafted three pages and redrafted them, and then drafted the opening again

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in a considerably different version: it left him dissatisfied, but in journalism space has to be filled and filled to time. He sent the typescript down to the composing room, and instead of going out for a quick meal and a drink, he decided to wait in his own room until a printer's proof was ready.

He looked through letters and planned his attendances for the remainder of the week and for the following week at sale rooms and galleries. His room was one of six arranged along a short corridor, far away from the presses and the larger rooms where the news pages were 'made up': at this hour the whole corridor was quiet. The last typist of the Book Page Department had gone home half an hour before. The dramatic critic who, between half past ten and eleven o'clock would come in, trotting and panting, to write his piece about the evening's new play, would now be changing into a black tie and dinner jacket. It was a big night at Covent Garden, so the music critic would be cutting a grander figure in white tie and tails. The film critic, having sat in some small projection theatre in or near Wardour Street through one new film in the morning, and another after luncheon, had gone home, to make his notes there and draft an article which would not appear until Friday's paper. There were times, and this was one of them, when James Hogan preferred his part of the *Reformer* offices to be deserted, silent and, except for the light on his desk, in darkness. Such conditions enabled him to focus his mind on his work: as work was in suspense, they concentrated his thoughts on the subject of Eleanor Kent.

Silence and solitude and the sense of intermission in

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the passage of time all combined to urge him to lift the telephone receiver on his desk and ask for a number he had never forgotten since he first looked it up in the directory. It would be a call paid for by the *Reformer*, but he could make a note to deduct sixpence from his next expenses claim, which was the way he placated his conscience when he could not avoid making such a private call from his office. This one, of course, he could avoid. There was also to be considered the possibility that to telephone to Eleanor Kent would be an error of taste, an error of tactics or some other kind of error. Less than two hours before she had got rid of him outside the Tate. She was not rude about it, but she had made him realise that he was no longer wanted. If her mood, before two full hours had elapsed, remained the same, it would hardly be improved when she heard his voice at the other end of a telephone wire. Besides, what excuse had he for calling her? He had lived out thirty-nine years. He would soon be forty. He had been married. He had been through three or four love affairs, none of them durable, none of them satisfying, and surely he had amassed enough experience to know when to keep out of the way. He ought to be able to restrain his hand from moving forward towards a telephone. He did not restrain it nevertheless, but before his fingertips could clutch and lift, he heard the door across the room open. Out of the half-lighted corridor a messenger boy brought him slip proofs of his article, set to single column measure.

'Right,' he said, speaking just as he might speak on any ordinary evening. 'I'll take them down to the comps myself.' That minor decision gave him a few more

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minutes of silence and solitude, but it put a term to the pressure of the impulse to telephone. There were three words he had written which he disliked the moment he saw them in print. He struck them out but was not wholly convinced that the alternatives he put in precisely indicated the meaning of what he wanted to say. He found no less than six literals, errors of spelling or punctuation which would, in theory at least, be corrected by the proof-reader, whether or not he himself corrected this proof. He recast the penultimate sentence, liked it no better, did it again, and, before hitting on a simpler version, made such a mess on the coarse, absorbent proof paper that he was compelled to transfer all the corrections to the spare proof. This occupied nearly twenty minutes. After that he had no excuse: either he used the telephone or he did not.

Experience bade him be wise. Experience reminded him that he could telephone the following day or the day after that. Women are more sensitive than men, they take offence when a man has no idea he has given offence. Time is a healer, experience said, time provides a dressing for every wound. At forty one ought to know that the thing to do, when in doubt, is almost always to do nothing. If experience would only remove the qualifying 'almost' its sage precepts would be more useful! The question, whether or not he should telephone Eleanor, had been begged, not answered.

The telephone became an agent of temptation again. He walked away from it. He picked up his hat and raincoat, he picked up the corrected proof, he switched out the light on his desk and walked out into the corridor, down four flights of stairs, along another corridor, and into

the composing room. One by one he went through his corrections with the senior proof-reader, so that there should be no 'queries', so that he might go away and leave no word of where he was to spend the rest of the evening.

He walked uphill and, when he came to Fleet Street, checked the time of his watch with the *Daily Telegraph* clock: it was twenty-seven minutes past six. There was time for him to eat, here in Fleet Street or in the West End or at his club, and counteract his customary evening loneliness with a theatre or a cinema or, if he should be desperate, with the ballet. He hated to swither between possible decisions, but this evening not one decision seemed possible. It was unlikely that he would derive anything but frustration from a search for amusement in his own glum company, so, when a No. 13 bus came along from Ludgate Circus, he climbed aboard and hardly glanced down at the bright evening lamps of the Strand, Piccadilly Circus, Regent Street and Oxford Street. The rush hour had ended and the bus made a reasonably smooth and quick journey. It was only a few minutes after seven o'clock when he let himself into his own flat in St John's Wood.

There were no letters awaiting him and, once inside, he was at home, safe from all intrusions. Here and now he could be himself without the slightest acknowledgment of an obligation to custom, tradition, or the notions that other people imposed simply by expecting him to do or say this, that or the other. At the Tate Gallery he had behaved as an art historian who is also a journalist and of some standing. At the *Reformer* office he behaved, even when he was shut up in his own room, as Fleet Street

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expected an art critic to behave. In the street he was a pedestrian: on the bus he was a passenger, hardly bothering to notice anyone else, doing his best to make sure that nobody else noticed him. Here, in his flat, his personality was, or should be, unconditioned. It could expand to any size and shape it wished or was capable of.

This was his fortress, his place of refuge, his place of personal freedom. Whatever he did here, no one else would ever know unless he decided to let them know. He could choose in this, his lonely home, between action and inaction, between the contemplative life intensified until he was almost a mind without a body, a life of purposeful thought, or a life stimulated moment by moment through the senses of sight and hearing. He could read and be beguiled. He could read and be instructed. He could look at his drawings and at reproductions of other drawings. He could switch on his television set and in a moment or two achieve the illusion, on a miniature scale, of a vicarious existence. He could switch on his record-player and, closing his eyes, take in music from the throbbing air without distractions. He had any number of resources at command and there were all kinds of things he might have done instead of what he did do.

He picked up the telephone and began to dial a Flaxman number.

He had a safety valve. If either the blasted housekeeper or the blasted daughter answered, he would, without saying a word, replace the receiver on its cradle. It would be mean but it would save a lot of explanation. It seemed to him important that, for Eleanor's sake, nobody else should know that he was calling her.

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The importunate ringing far away was cut short. A voice, a woman's voice, a lady's voice – and it must be hers – gave the name of the exchange and the number he had dialled.

He began clumsily and a long way away from the point he intended. 'I hope I'm not being an awful nuisance——'

'Oh, it's you,' she said.

'I've been worrying.'

'What about?'

'Two things,' he said. 'First, I don't know what I did wrong this afternoon.'

No sound at all came from the ear-piece.

'Are you there? Eleanor, are you still there?'

'Of course I am, but I don't know what you mean.'

Experience had warned him wisely. It had been a big mistake to telephone her at all. Suddenly, her voice rising and crackling a little in the ear-piece, she said 'Forget that. I shouldn't have said it. I do know what you were talking about. And it wasn't your fault.'

The thought that she should blame herself for anything at all was intolerable to him. He began to protest, but she interrupted, eager, it seemed, to complete her own explanation.

'At the time,' she said, 'I didn't know why I was ditching you. And I still don't know why. I just felt I had to get away and be alone for a few minutes. But it wasn't personal. It hadn't anything to do with you.'

'Do you mean,' he asked, 'that if you had been to the Tate with someone else——'

'I expect so.'

He had doubts. 'I know what the trouble was. I talked

too much. Because I'm interested in a subject I assume that other people are too.'

'James,' she said, 'listen to me.'

It was the first time she has used his name. Perhaps she needed the long separation, the freedom from the scrutiny of his eyes, which the telephone afforded, to find the courage to speak his name aloud. 'You're not a bore. At least, you're not a bore to me.' She laughed. 'I don't know about other people, James, and I don't care.'

He felt as though he had been crowned with laurels.

'Don't be too nice to me,' he begged. 'I'm all alone and to tell you the truth I'm a bit worked up already.'

She said nothing. He feared that the odd, concentrated privacy of the telephone had tempted him too far. If she were seriously embarrassed, she might ring off.

Instead, she asked suddenly: 'You're not talking from the *Reformer*, are you?'

He told her that he was in his own flat.

'Oh,' she said. 'St John's Wood? That's quite a way.'

He told her that his car was parked in the street, almost under his windows.

'You've never told me you had a car!'

'I don't use it much in the daytime. Not during the week. It's easier without it. If I'd brought it today, I'd have had to find somewhere to park for lunch. And then get it out again, and then find somewhere at the Tate. I was wondering - it was one of the things I rang up about - if you would let me come over and we might go somewhere for dinner?'

'No, I can't do that.'

She said she was about to eat her evening meal, which

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was usually served early so that the housekeeper could spend as long as possible in front of the television set.

'She would be offended, and I don't blame her, if I walked out now.'

'But afterwards?'

She laughed. Then, with her voice quite serious, she said: 'James, I'll be honest with you. I want to be honest with you. It's true, when I got into that taxi this afternoon and left you standing there, I didn't know what made me do it. Strictly I don't know now. But I could make a good guess. I was being a bitch. I wanted to treat you badly and see how you would take it. I also wanted to leave you flat and then wait and see how long it would be before you swallowed your pride and tried to get in touch with me. It would have served me right if you had dropped me altogether. But you didn't and I'm glad and, yes, if you really mean it, I'll come out with you and have a coffee somewhere.'

She suggested that they should meet at about nine o'clock – this was to give him time to get an adequate meal first – somewhere between her flat and his.

He wanted to save her trouble, and he wanted to be at the driving-wheel of his own car, with her beside him. He brought forward the time of the appointment to half-past eight and said he would call for her.

'Half past eight then.'

It was eight minutes before the half-hour when he reached Queen's Gate. Other cars were parked along the pavement in front of the block of flats, and he could not find a free space very near. He went up in the lift and got out at the right floor. He reached the flat and stretched

out his hand towards the bell button. His hand however, with thumb and middle finger touching at the tips, and the forefinger extended, ready to press the bell, stayed still in mid-air.

The door was closed but, inserted into the metal plate of the upper lock, was a key, only the disc-like haft visible, with a bunch of other small keys, strung on a ring, hanging below it.

It was easy to guess what had happened.

He felt a strong impulse in his hands to turn the key, to discover whether it worked and, if it did, to open the door and enter the flat. It was an irresponsible impulse and a powerful one. He might have yielded to it but at that moment there was a sound from the other side of the door, then a smaller sound from the lock, and the door was drawn back. Eleanor stood facing him, this time without a hat and with the high collar of her dark tweed coat pulled up round her face.

She was more surprised than he was but, inexplicably, he felt guilty. He stammered a little as he explained how he came to be there.

She was obviously not going to ask him in, for she moved towards him, compelling him to step back, and reaching behind her to grasp the brass door handle above the letter box and pull the door to.

'Wait a minute,' he cried, smiling, teasing her a little, 'you've left your key there!'

She turned so rapidly that she knocked his outstretched arm aside and it was she who pulled the jingling bunch of keys away from the door. She did it so energetically that she dropped one of her gloves, and by the time he

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had located it on the floor and picked it up, she had put the keys out of sight and was fastening her handbag.

‘How careless of me!’ she said, as they walked down the stairs side by side. ‘It’s a new key. Since we had burglars. I suppose I’m not used to it yet.’

She was less agitated than she had been a moment since, but still, he thought, surprisingly upset by such a small mischance.

‘Everybody,’ he said, ‘forgets things now and then.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Edge of the Bed

She had not expected a Rolls or a Jaguar but the small and dusty saloon car which Hogan indicated as his looked, at best, unimpressive.

Perhaps her feelings showed in her face, for he said: 'Three years old when I bought it. You see, if I wasted money on cars and gadgets I'd have to do without drawings.'

Obviously everything came second to his drawings. But he was polite. He held the car door open for her although he did not look the other way when she made the best job she could of the tricky process of inserting herself, bent from the hips, into the seat and then swinging her legs into the car without showing too much of her stockings. She had compromised with the present, babyish neo-1920's fashion, refusing to wear, along with bows and tiers and lampshade hems, very short and very tight skirts. She liked to believe that, had she been twenty years younger, she would still have had her clothes made the way she preferred. Twenty years earlier she had been wearing W.A.A.F. uniform – but only until she married. She had married out of the Services: she had married a civilian many years her senior; she had borne him a daughter. He was dead and she was alive and she was going out now with another man. The other man took a good

look at her, as Claude would never have done, and said: 'I must say I like that gown.'

'It isn't a gown, it's a frock,' she snapped at him.

'All the same, I like it.'

It was a 'little black frock', a standard model, but not so standardised as Hogan's car. It was made of heavy watered silk with a cummerbund of jersey wool to connect the bodice to the skirt. Her top coat had fallen open. She pulled it round her again and wondered if he really had the discrimination to perceive that she had put on, for his benefit, one of the most expensive garments she possessed, one she normally would wear only for a rather grand party. Or, when he complimented her on what he called her gown, was he intending her to understand that what he was talking about was her stockings and her petticoat? And did he take that line because he understood, a damned sight better than he would let on, what sort of Freudian symbolism could be read into the shocking spectacle of a key left inserted in a keyhole?

Freud would hardly allow that there was such a thing as chance or a genuine error by the mind. She wondered how the old fascinator would have managed had he been a compulsive gambler or a ledger clerk in a business office trying to trace a missing sixpence in time for the annual audit? Right or wrong – and he always managed to make you feel that if you rejected any of his propositions it was because that one touched on something peculiarly shameful in your own mind – right or wrong, Freud would have it that she had left the key in the lock because her unconscious mind urged her to do so. The unconscious was the kitchen sink and the kitchen stove where sex boiled and bubbled

incessantly. The unconscious knew exactly what the key in the door symbolised. At intervals, as now, it would shout the ribald interpretation into the echoing spaces of the conscious mind.

Hogan came round the back of the car, opened the door on the offside and slid himself, without any of the troubles and responsibilities which had afflicted her, into the seat behind the steering column.

‘Where?’

She had no ideas. ‘Let’s stop when we see somewhere we like,’ she said.

He slammed the door on his side and the engine must have been still warm, for it started at the first touch. They made quite a tour of South Kensington and Earls Court – all stucco and blossom trees and gardens crowded with daffodils. Then, turning south along The Boltons, they came into the ill-lighted streets of Chelsea.

‘I suppose you come here often?’ she asked. ‘For your work?’

He shook his head. He said that painters and sculptors had for some years been moving out of Chelsea because the smart young fashionables from Cadogan Square were spreading westward and sending up prices. At the same time, aspirant or amateur artists, most of them literary or musical, had made settlements in the dingier, dilapidated houses around the World’s End pub and tended to move towards Sloane Square for their evening amusement, exactly when the well-to-do who lived in those parts dressed up and showed themselves in Mayfair and Knightsbridge as the ‘Chelsea Set’.

This provided her with a reason, or a semblance of a

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reason, for selecting the next coffee bar they came to as a stopping-place. He parked round the corner and she was out of the car before he was. She had agreed to come because she wanted the experience of being really alone with him, secure against other people's eyes and ears: only a room or a car could supply such privacy; a room was out of the question and the car had not, so far, been very successful. Next came the ceremony of drinking coffee in public, which had to be gone through because it supplied the excuse for the two of them being out together at all.

It turned out to be one of the very dark coffee bars, lighted from the ceiling downwards, the lamps themselves screened by suspended draperies of what she thought, disparagingly, might be cheap and textureless polythene. Even in daylight it must have been a place of heavy shadows, for there was more of it than one would guess from the street window, in which odd-looking plants rose vertically six foot and more out of flower pots to make a curtain of lustreless leaves. Behind the street window was a small room with posters pinned on the wall, a serving counter with a cash register, a stove with a grill which glowed crimson out of the darkness, and the coffee-making machine. A few customers, faceless shadows, sat there listening to tuneless music.

'Perhaps I'd better go first?'

One thing about James Hogan, and it was important, was that he seemed to be, by nature, considerate. She was glad to let him move in front of her and lead the way to a narrow path between tables which led to a wooden railing overlooking two other rooms, on a slightly lower level.

So far as they could see in the semi-darkness the room

below to the left was less crowded, and when they entered it they presently found a table unoccupied.

She wanted coffee and nothing else and she wanted to get away as soon as they could. They stared round the smoky room, and the people they could see, sitting impassively at tables, stared back at them but without curiosity. Only when, for a moment, Eleanor gave it her full attention did she realise that the music had changed from instrumental to vocal. The voice sang flat. The song had no structure and no melody. It came to – not a climax but an end and at once another piece of music began. What had been a voice pulsating became a piano pulsating in the same, subdued, repetitive and unemphatic style. The others in the room, the customers, talked not so much to each other as in the presence of each other, and not above the music but through it and almost in time with it. They spoke without animation or urgency. It was difficult to be sure in such tenebrosity but none of them looked to be more than twenty years old. Hogan was the only man wearing a collar and tie.

The coffee was brought, topped up in the shallow cups with a white froth.

‘I think it’s a crematorium,’ said Hogan. ‘Soft lights, sedative music – and thank goodness you didn’t want anything from the grill!’

She clutched at his arm as they made their way back to the cash register beside the crimson grill he had maligned. She could feel the solemn disapproval of the artistic youth of Chelsea glowering at her from each corner of the shadowy room because she had dared to laugh aloud.

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'It was my fault,' she said when they reached the street. 'I picked the place.'

They walked round the corner and reached the car. She was not helpful. She told him she had no wish to go to a pub, or to any other sort of café for better coffee, or for a run out of London, up the river for example.

'There's always Hampstead Heath,' he said.

All she wanted – or all she had wanted when she agreed to this expedition and before things began to go wrong, at the very front door of her flat – was to be with him alone for a time. Hampstead would have to do. He took them the bus route way, as far as Harrods, and then into the Park by the new entrance under the glassy new Bowater building beside the Hyde Park Hotel. He went left towards the cavalry barracks, and then over the Serpentine bridge, coming out into Sussex Gardens. They spoke as little to each other as they had done in the coffee-bar: there were times for talk and times for silence. She had gone as far to help him as a decent woman ought to be expected to go. The rest was up to him. They crossed Maida Vale. He seemed confident he knew the way, and he did, for five minutes later she saw an Underground station, and before long the car was climbing a winding, rising road and presently she recognised the little pond or lake beside Jack Straw's Castle.

'Anywhere in particular?'

'Isn't there a view?' she asked.

'But it's pretty dark tonight. No moon. Don't be disappointed.'

Was he so literal-minded? Did he really think she wanted to look at a view?

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There were several motor roads across the Heath, but for the most part it was a small irregular plateau of grass and trees, crossed by footpaths. Urban Hampstead, where everyone was said to be well-to-do, lay tucked away at the sides and on lower levels, most of it out of sight. When they came on to the stretch of road which afforded a long and wide view over London, Hogan put on the brakes and would have stopped the car under a lamp-post. She gave him a side glance and he dropped into a lower gear and ran the car another hundred yards or so.

When she looked out of the side window, she could see, the other side of a low stone wall, the tops of trees: the ground must fall away steeply there. Beyond was London, seen from the north-east, a vast expanse of tiny lights, embedded in shadows, without contours and without a traceable skyline.

He leaned towards her and a little in front of her and he was very careful not to touch her, as he peered through the same side window and said: 'If we got out we might be able to see St Paul's.'

'I see it every day,' she told him.

He drew back and saw that she was laughing. He must also have seen that he had kept her waiting long enough. With the steering-wheel in front of his chest, he could hardly embrace her, so he reached across and with his right hand gripped her left arm above the elbow: his other hand touched her at the waist, holding her elbow as a pivot while he brought her away from the seat and towards him. It was not rough but a firm, decisive movement and, as her left shoulder came forward, and she felt her breast, through all the intervening clothes, alert to the pressure of his body,

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her head and throat jerked backwards, tilting her face up. His mouth came down on her mouth, and the kiss was hot and sweet and protracted.

The first thought that she could identify as a thought was: I've got more than I bargained for! The next thought was a reminder of something she had forgotten, or put out of mind: to have let him kiss her before she had investigated this matter showed her up as a woman lacking in pride and, worse still, unfastidious. The symbolism of the key left in the door was not only coarse, it was appropriate. It proved that Freud was right and the depths of the mind a sink of shameless iniquity. She repudiated herself by repudiating him, spreading her fingers on his chest and pushing him away from her.

'You're too quick,' she said, coldly. 'I want to know about your other woman.'

'What other woman?'

'You know what I mean.'

'I don't.'

It was vulgar, it was cheap, it was intolerable, this sort of chip-chop conversation, and if he persisted in his denials, how would it end except in her believing them because she wanted to believe, because, like any other female fool, she could not resist a man once she had let him go so far as to lay hands on her and rouse her with a kiss?

Suddenly he said: 'Oh that!'

And he laughed!

Seated beside him, at his left side, in the front seat of a parked car, she found it physically impossible to do what she yearned to do – strike him in the face. Her hands lifted

a few inches from where they lay in her lap, and the fingers twitched.

It was at this moment of her rage and frustration, that a car, moving slowly towards them on the other side of the road, switched on a spotlight. The white, concentrated dazzle came straight at them, only partly refracted on the windscreen and revealing the two of them, each to the other, pallidly astounded as if in a nightmare. Hogan, at her side, cursed, threw up a bent arm to shield his eyes, and then lowered it to open the car door. The spotlight swivelled, keeping the front seats of the car in full illumination as the other car came abreast. Hogan got one foot to the ground. By the time he was out of the car, the illumination was snapped off as suddenly as it had begun.

She heard Hogan shout: 'What the hell——?'

He was answered briefly and sharply. The other car, she saw as she looked over her shoulder, accelerated and was gone.

Hogan still standing on the road, told her: 'That was the bloody police.'

'Are you sure?'

She herself had no doubt. She was convinced she had recognised the voice from the other car as the voice of the C.I.D. sergeant who had come to her flat the night someone tried to steal the 'Venus' picture and had asked questions and searched for finger prints and never found any trace of the thieves who failed only because the picture was too big and too heavy for them to handle.

'That's what they said,' said Hogan. 'It looked like a police car, too.'

She now felt sure she had caught a glimpse of the

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Sergeant's face the moment the spotlight ceased to dazzle her. If he came back and asked questions——

'What did they want?'

It was a silly question. Hogan could not possibly supply the answer. He was patient. 'Who knows?' he said. 'Not us anyway.'

If the Sergeant came back, and found Hogan's car still parked here, and decided to investigate, and found her inside, and recognised her, as he surely would, it would be terrible, because she had just remembered that the first time she had left her front door key in the lock was the night of the burglary and she had concealed the fact from the police. A very few questions would break her nerve.

'Get in!' she cried to Hogan. 'Let's clear out. Anywhere away from here. I can't stand it any longer.'

Her throat gulped on the words as she spoke them. The tears, not yet shed, were hot in her eyes. She was behaving abominably but she could not help it. He drove downhill not so much carefully as thoughtfully. It was of her he was thinking. Presently he suggested: 'Would you like me to drive you straight home?'

Home was her home – Queen's Gate.

'I don't want to be seen like this.'

It was Miss Henderson's scrutiny that she feared, but he saw in her words another reference. 'Oh,' he said, 'your daughter? Of course, she was the one who told you I was in love with somebody else.'

He had brought the matter up again. Let him get on with it.

'I shouldn't have told her that,' he admitted. 'It wasn't true.' Turning away from the dark, hedge-lined road in

front of him, he gave her two reproachful glances. 'You know it wasn't true. You know it as well as I do.'

'Then why did you say it? Why, who do you have to tell lies?'

'If I answer that I'm bound to sound conceited. I might have said the same thing to any girl of her age. Just as you might have said it to any youngster who made eyes at you.'

He was side-stepping out of his difficulties very neatly.

'I'm not so resourceful as you,' she replied.

In an effort to cheer herself up and forget the humiliating tears she had shed, she tuned her voice to a brighter note.

'It was a very successful little lie, anyhow. I imagine you've had a lot of practice at that sort of thing?'

He refused to quarrel.

'Look,' he said earnestly, 'we're quite close now to where I live. There's no porter and I keep no servants. What I suggest is I wait in the car outside, and you go in and tidy up, and when you come out I'll run you home.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'Thank you, Sir Galahad.'

Once she started to laugh, she could not stop, and when he drew up and got out of the car, and, following, she saw him sliding back his arm, with elbow bent, to reach into his hip pocket, she exclaimed: 'Darling, I'd be more scared in there by myself than with you.'

There was not only no porter, there was no lift. Not so very long ago the flats had been a family house. All the way up the stairs to the second floor she wondered if he had noticed that she had called him 'darling'? Almost everything had gone wrong from the start of this evening, but not quite everything.

She was alert with curiosity to see what sort of place he

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lived in, but her first concern was to repair the havoc which the weeping fit must have wrought on her face. It was a clean bathroom but austere, even grim. She took her time with hot water and foundation cream and powder, and then renewed her lipstick, and tried to think as she worked, but thinking proved to be mostly feeling, and feeling was confused by an excitement she must not show.

She found him in what she presumed was his working room. There were books around the walls to a height of about five feet, and above that drawings. There was a chest and a desk, and he was sitting at the desk. It seemed to her surprisingly grand, for an art historian, to have so many framed drawings on display and she noticed that both walls of the hall, as they came in, were similarly hung. What she recognised instantly as the appurtenances of an art historian were the photographs of pictures piled on top of the desk, and the copy, presumably the current one, of the *Burlington Magazine*.

'I'm ready,' she announced.

She did not say that she was ready to be driven home but that, surely was what she meant? If she had intended to imply a challenge, he did not recognise it. She remembered, drearily, from a long time ago, masculine desire as an undependable phenomenon, accumulating very slowly and at long intervals, capricious, easily balked. It had not been like that with James Hogan, who surprised her with the speed and precision of his embrace in the car and surprised her again with the hot urgency of his looks and his hands. That had come to nothing, however, for he had been put off and, having lost his ardour, seemed unlikely to regain it. He had dwindled to Sir Galahad. Sir Galahad

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was out in the hall, with the lights full on, surrounded by his framed drawings, holding up her coat. It would do him no harm to be left there, holding up the coat, a little longer.

‘May I look at your drawings first?’

He told her, gravely, that it would take too long. The big wooden chest, in his working room, was full of drawings, mostly unmounted and it would need several visits to examine them properly.

He had cooled down himself and now he was trying to chill her! She determined to make him pay for the insult by inspecting, one after another, and at her own deliberate pace, every framed drawing hung on every wall. Through one open doorway she saw a kitchen where she guessed he ate most of his meals. Through another she saw a settee, book cases, a television set, and, of course, framed drawings on the walls. She decided to start her tour of inspection there.

The trouble was, some of the drawings not only impressed but interested her. She realised that most of them were sixteenth century and there were few landscapes among them. Religious or profane, figure studies or sketches for compositions, each drawing was concerned with human beings rather than things or places. When she asked, he gave her names, adding, sometimes, that the attribution was a tentative one. They were mostly Italian names. ‘They’re all Mannerist,’ he said. ‘You can count that against me if you like.’

‘Why on earth should I?’

She saw him change his mind about what reply to give her. What he said was: ‘According to the psycholo-

gists, it's a give-away to like Mannerist art. That is, the sort of Mannerism I like, in which the arms and legs are elongated and the whole body looks taller and more slender and, as it were, more spiral than in real life.' She looked again at a Bertoja, the larger of his two Primaticcios and the anonymous Flemish 'Judgment of Paris'.

'I see what you mean,' she said. 'They are a bit unnatural.'

What she meant was that she herself was not built like the nude and semi-nude women who decorated his walls. He understood. He was amused. Quite a number of art historians had a sense of humour, scholarly and allusive, about certain aspects of their own subject.

'Oh well, I chose to live my life one way,' he said, 'and it was bound to have consequences. Including, I suppose, these drawings.'

She had no clue to what he meant. She felt her temper sharpen suddenly and, abandoning the drawings, she swung round to face him and demanded: 'Are you being cryptic on purpose? Are you talking like that to keep me here?'

'I'd do anything to keep you here,' he said.

She swore at him.

It might not have been an inevitable sequence from the moment the car stopped outside the flat, but it felt like that now, and she was glad, and on top of that she had the satisfaction of achieving something she had not only worked for but waited for.

'With you,' she told him presently, 'it's a hell of a long time between kisses.'

'Do I talk too much?'

'Sometimes.'

'Sometimes I talk to myself. It comes of living alone.'

He wasn't one to be content with kissing and holdings. She broke away from him and went to the closed door, and with her hand on the knob, asked: 'This is the bedroom, isn't it?'

She had opened the door by that time, and could see for herself that she had guessed right.

'Don't come till I call you.'

'Listen to me,' she thought: 'listen to the way I said that. I might be a nursemaid or a teacher!' The next moment she put two and two together, realising that the gas fire in the bedroom had been burning some time, and the total made her wits crackle with indignation.

'You devil!' she called through the open door and across the hall. 'You planned it all! You knew I'd be scared to come up here alone and I suppose you thought I wouldn't be able to resist your fatal charm!'

He came to the door of his working room to answer her.

'It's not true. Eleanor, I tell you it's not true. But when you came in I did begin to hope, and as long as there was an outside chance – darling, I didn't want you to be cold.'

James the Considerate!

'I suppose that every time you persuade a woman to call on you, you slip in here and light the fire on the off-chance?'

'If you want to know about me and women, I'll tell you. Yes, there were one or two years ago now. All in the same eighteen months. But ever since there have been none. None at all!'

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His voice grew vehement, and harsh. 'I packed up on love or sex or whatever you like to call it seven years back. I live a cerebral life now. I'm dehydrated. I'm a sub-man.'

She believed him and did not despise him for it and in a way understood him. She closed the bedroom door again.

All her clothes were made to be put on and taken off without assistance. The black silk had side zips. She found herself undressing very fast and repudiated an unspoken indictment by maintaining, also silently, that it would be a catastrophe, and a vulgar one, for him to find her in her underwear.

'Naked or nothing,' she said softly. Then she thought: 'I'm beginning to talk to myself too! We need each other,' she decided. 'It's more than time we came together.' She switched off both the electric lamps. The soft illumination from the gas fire was all they would need.

She opened the door into the hall and called to him. After that, she took fright and ran to the bed, and opened it up. No one could call it a luxurious bed but it was clean. It was cold too as she thrust her legs down and pulled the turnover of sheet and blanket up until only her face was left uncovered.

When he appeared at the door, he was wearing a dressing gown. It was crimson, of artificial silk: she knew who made the material and the weight and the price, wholesale and retail. His bare legs, showing below the hem, looked as white as mushroom stalks. He was James the Considerate, and she loved him for it, but he hadn't thought of offering her a dressing gown. Perhaps he owned only the one? Perhaps he, too, was scared of this moment? He came to the edge of the bed and bent over

her: she saw that he was preparing to say something. Not now, she silently besought him, not a disquisition now!

'There's a question I've got to ask,' he said. 'And I don't want you to think it depends on this.'

By 'this' he seemed to mean the bed.

'What question?' she said.

He scowled and called her an idiot and then, with his arms spread like wings above her and one knee denting the mattress at her side, he asked her to marry him.

'But,' he added earnestly, 'you don't have to answer now. Later on will do. Tomorrow if you like.'

One of the reasons she loved him was that he was considerate, but sometimes he strained her patience.

'I don't want you to feel,' he went on, 'I'm rushing you ; in any way.'

'No,' she said, 'you're not doing that. Not in any way.'

He could take a hint if it was broad enough.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tracing Paper

The next morning Eleanor did not awake until Miss Henderson came knocking on the bedroom door to tell her that she was already late. Miss Henderson volunteered to bring her breakfast on a tray. This was something she rarely allowed herself but she accepted now as a means of keeping out of her daughter's way. One such encounter was enough and more than enough. All she wanted was to get out of the flat. Many a working woman before her, she supposed, must have spent a night of irregular love, in a bed not her own, and afterwards found it difficult to face daylight and an office desk and the people she worked with. Five days a week, in every city, there must be hundreds, if not thousands, of women carrying with them on their early morning journey hot, secret, overnight memories not to be spoken of. For her, at the age of forty, it would be a new experience.

She might have felt better able to face the morning ordeal had her night of love lasted the whole night through, had there not been the bleak necessity to rise and dress and go downstairs and be driven, almost silent, almost incredulous of what had happened, back to her own flat for a farewell kiss and a promise, exacted from her, that they should meet again within twenty-four hours. He was soon

to be her husband, and that ought to take away the guilt, the feeling that what was done was wrong because it was clandestine.

She got out of bed and went to the dressing table and the mirror. She looked, she decided, distrait rather than guilty. She looked her age, which was only to be expected at five minutes to eight in the morning. It might have been worse. She had feared to find herself looking haggard or furtive or even debauched.

Miss Henderson brought in the tray and set it on the small table near the window.

‘And how are you feeling now?’ she asked.

Towards evening, Miss Henderson tended to be more genteel than Scottish, but in the early morning her accent was usually ripe and raw. She had just pronounced ‘now’ as ‘noo’.

‘I’m fine,’ Eleanor assured her in the same idiom, ‘and I’ll be all the better for this delicious breakfast.’

It was essential to have Miss Henderson in sympathetic alliance. It was also essential to discover, otherwise than by direct questioning, how much remained in her memory of that part of the rumpus she had witnessed and, more important, that later part of it she might have overheard from her bedroom.

‘I’m letting Miss Barbara sleep on,’ Miss Henderson said. ‘I dare say it upset her, making that foolish mistake, and then being just as heavy a sleeper as I am myself.’

In the kindly words there might lie an implication, and if so, it was a challenge. The challenge had to be met. Eleanor looked Miss Henderson straight in the eyes, and almost at once saw the Scotswoman’s gaze swerve aside.

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This meant, Eleanor concluded, that she knew very little of what had happened after the explanations, apparently reasonable, which Barbara had given in the hall as soon as the front door was at last opened. It also meant that Miss Henderson could no longer hope to conceal the fact that, every now and then, she drank a little too much whisky, and drank it alone in her own room. She had been fuddled last night and had roused herself with great difficulty and afterwards must have gone straight back to sleep. She had heard none of the terrible things which Barbara had said, at the top of her voice it seemed then, things which no daughter ought to say to her mother.

It was from Barbara that the danger would come, and would come the more powerfully and pitilessly because, last night, in what she no doubt regarded as a preliminary encounter, the girl had seen her mother taken by surprise, nerve-shocked, defenceless. After the act of love everyone is defenceless; and after the act of love performed without premeditation, or almost without premeditation, and without licence from society, after her first intimacy with a new lover, who was only the second man in all her life, Eleanor was well aware of her own vulnerability. When she left the car in Queen's Gate, at about twenty minutes after midnight, her mind was directed to one objective – to reach her own flat, then her own bedroom, without having to talk to anybody en route. There was no night porter. It took her less than a minute to go up in the lift and to send it down again. When she turned towards her own flat, she saw no light showing. The worst was over, she had thought. All she needed to do was to turn the key, open the door and go quietly to bed. She tried again,

and then again. There was no mistake. The safety catch had been snapped down on the inner side of the door. Whether or not the second lock was in use or the bolts had been shot did not matter. The only way she could obtain entrance to her own flat was by bringing someone to the door to release the catch.

She pressed the bell. It was, in a way, amusing to think, over breakfast in bed, how gently and briefly she had pressed the bell button at first. Nobody came. No light showed through the glass of the door. She could hear no sound from inside the flat except the thin, far-off whirrings from the little rusty bell suspended above the kitchen door. She pressed harder and longer but still without response. It was at that moment that she felt the first keen temptation to walk away from all her responsibilities, to walk away down to the street where she could find a taxi rank and go back to her lover and be simply a woman again, not a householder and a taxpayer, a manager in a textile business, as well as a widow, a picture owner and a mother.

On the door was a small brass knocker, more for ornament than use. She began to rap with it between ringings. Still nobody came to the door. She tried to remember where the nearest call box was, in case she was compelled to go out and telephone her own flat in order to arouse either her daughter or her housekeeper. But if they were not awakened by door bell and knocker, used alternately, and used also simultaneously, why should they hear the telephone?

It humiliated her now to remember that she had lost her temper. She had kept the bell ringing continuously and hammered on the door panels with her fists, leaning

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her face close against the door, and calling on the two women inside to awaken. In the end, it was not one of them but the two together, who came down the corridor and, after first demanding to know who wanted admittance, opened the door at last.

At one glance she had seen that Miss Henderson, her grey hair hanging witch-like round her shoulders, her face gone lax and formless, had been drinking. It was Barbara she gave her attention to, for Barbara did not look at all sleepy, and Barbara was still in her day clothes, her brown wool dress and black stockings.

‘Who locked me out?’

Miss Henderson attempted no reply.

Barbara said: ‘It must have been me. I remember I thought I’d wait up for you but I must have fallen asleep in the drawing-room. What time is it?’ The girl answered her own question by consulting her wrist watch, and then gave a side glance at Miss Henderson and repeated, slowly: ‘Thirty-two minutes past twelve.’

Miss Henderson was too tipsy to understand.

Barbara then said, sweetly and treacherously: ‘I hope you haven’t been a very long time trying to get in?’

It was almost as though, ignoring and despising Miss Henderson, she were boasting to her mother that in fact she had not been asleep at all, that she had put on the safety catch on purpose and would have been glad if the porter or some of the other tenants had been disturbed by the noises at the front door.

‘Well, you’d better go to your beds – both of you.’

Miss Henderson went at once and gladly. Barbara gave her mother an insolent look and walked ahead across the

hall to the drawing room, where the lights were on and the fire as well.

'Come in here,' she said, and she spoke the words not as a request or a suggestion but as a command.

'I'll talk to you in the morning,' Eleanor had said.

Barbara stared at her and smiled and answered: 'Mother, you had better understand something. Although you didn't see me, I saw you this evening.'

It was a sickening, humiliating and intensely apprehensive moment, in which Eleanor went through a chaos of horrible speculations: her imagination saw Hogan's car followed all evening by another car, saw Barbara, gloating, behind the spotlight which on Hampstead Heath had persecuted them with its intrusive illumination, and even wondered whether they had been spied on in Hogan's flat.

Fortunately, her daughter almost at once revealed the limited extent of her knowledge.

'I saw you come into the coffee bar and I saw you go out. I saw who you were with,' she said. 'You left at five past nine. And you're not home till now.'

She walked ahead into the drawing-room, confident that her mother would follow.

If it was not the only thing, it was, so far as Eleanor could guess, the best thing for her to do. She followed and closed the door behind her.

The situation was a familiar one, a cliché of domestic life, but turned topsy-turvy, so that it was the young daughter, tense with puritanic suspicions, who had waited up for the return of a prodigal mother. A great deal could be understood and forgiven, but not the locking of the front door. That was an act of deliberate cruelty. It was symbolic too,

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Eleanor thought, reviewing, while she ate her breakfast, the scene between herself and Barbara in the drawing-room which, at one point, Barbara had called a 'show-down'. Locking her mother out late at night symbolised, surely, the girl's desire to be independent. It also symbolised perhaps, that part of her feeling for her mother which was hatred or repudiation sprung from her reverential love for her dead father.

She had spoken first. She had put a question, thereby taking the initiative. 'If you saw me,' she demanded, 'why didn't you speak to me?'

'I was with friends,' Barbara said. 'They did not know you. They said things about you. And the man you were with.'

'And you let them?'

'I learned a lot by keeping my mouth shut,' Barbara said. 'I saw you as other people see you.'

♦ What a mistake that coffee bar had been! A baby grows into a child, a child into a girl, and a girl into a woman, but the woman who bore the baby remains throughout a woman with not only human needs but female needs. It was common sense, it was ancient wisdom also, that the child, with her incessant demand that her mother should always function as a mother, should be excluded from knowledge that her mother leads another life as a mate to a man. Until now it had not been too difficult to achieve such a separation for Barbara: her father was dead, her mother had no sex life.

The easy situation had ended. The new situation was going to be all the harder if Barbara continued to assume that she could talk to her mother, in the course of the

same discussion, from the standpoint of a daughter, born of her body, and also from the standpoint of one adult woman criticising another adult woman's behaviour.

Barbara in her arraignment was repetitious: she kept returning to the same point. 'And where have you been since then? More than three hours!'

It was not only unnatural, it was indecent that a daughter should interrogate her mother in such a style, and that her mother dare not cut her short because she had been exercising faculties which mothers are supposed to rid themselves of. Worse still, she had been doing it in secret, and she had been doing it with a man who was not the girl's father. From all her recent memories she was compelled to insulate herself, to pretend that nothing had happened of which her daughter might disapprove. There was a way out there but it would make a liar of her. Suddenly she realised that she need not lie: James Hogan, her James, James the Considerate, had provided her with the means of escaping from the dilemma.

Before she could speak, Barbara, pale and trembling as she came to the climax of her indictment, threw angry questions at her.

'How long has it been going on? I suppose it was you who told him to lie to me? Aren't you ashamed of your hypocrisy? How long have you been his mistress?'

From that moment, Eleanor began to feel confident. What she had to say would be a shock for Barbara, but the shock would do her good and ought to help to heal some of her jealousies.

She was amused by her daughter's use of the word 'mistress' and said so.

'A bit old-fashioned, isn't it?'

The comment was not at all what the girl had expected. For one moment, instead of experiencing intense indignation against another person, which served to integrate her own unstable personality, she was forced to think about herself in a critical way. There was no need to take the initiative from her. She surrendered it.

Speaking quietly and calmly, and, she hoped, with some of the passionless dignity which is required of mothers when their children are under emotional stress, Eleanor said: 'I was going to tell you this next week when I shall be free to give you some other news.'

Barbara interrupted, unappeased.

'What other news?'

'Nothing like this. Nothing personal. What I am telling you now, Barbara, I could not tell you before. It's about Mr Hogan. He has asked me to marry him. I have accepted.'

Any normal girl, knowing nothing, of course, of the circumstances in which that proposal of marriage had been made, would have been overwhelmed with shame and remorse. Not Barbara! But then she could not be normal or she would never have locked her mother out of her own home and, to drag out the torture, pretended to be asleep while in fact, she must have been here in this drawing-room, relishing the crescendo of frantic sounds from the front door.

As if to confirm this surmise, Barbara had burst into tears and, her voice choking from the upsurge of emotion, cried: 'You have no right to marry anyone. I hate you. I hate that man too. I never want to see him again and I never want——'

In all probability she had been going to say that she never wanted to see her mother again either, but before she could complete the sentence, her voice gave out. This was the final exacerbation of her feelings and she rushed from the room to her bedroom, where she locked herself in. There her mother left her: no good could come of further beating on a door or of any kind of speech.

Nearly eighteen years of maternal care, anxieties and nursings, savings and aspirations, counted for nothing: the final effect on the girl was to produce hatred. In herself also, as she lay awake for several hours afterwards, Eleanor found fierce emotions not unlike hatred. The child's resentment against her parent of the same sex was a part or standard psychology: there was a formula for it and a formula for explaining it. A mother also had resentments, and plenty of them: they might, for a time at least, destroy affection. She and Barbara were not so far from becoming two women, of different generations, who had been forced to live for many years close to each other but liked and understood each other less and less. This was what she feared: this was what she must guard against, but how to go about it she did not know.

At her office the day's work went fast, and the small back-log accumulated by her absence the afternoon before gave her an excuse to lunch at her own desk on coffee and sandwiches brought in for her. From half-past nine in the morning till half-past five at night, with hardly a moment spared for a private thought, she was cut off from the turmoils she had left behind her. At half-past five her first thought was to return to her flat and discover whether the passage of the hours had done anything to

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soften her daughter's anger, but as soon as she stepped out into the street, becoming immediately one of thousands about to return home for the evening, she found James Hogan confronting her. It was inconvenient but she was delighted. If he wanted to kiss her, then and there, on the crowded pavements of Cheapside, he should have his wish.

He was content to raise his hat. He looked almost sour, or perhaps dogged was a better word. Certainly he was in no light-hearted mood. He led her to one of the narrow lanes descending towards Cannon Street and the Thames where, in a semi-private and very small car park, paved with stones not less than four hundred years old, he had left his car, their car, the car of their complicity.

'But I would get home quicker by Underground,' she said.

'We can't talk on the Underground,' he reminded her.

He decided that the quickest route would be along the Embankment as far as Chelsea, and, to save time, he left her to get in at her own side while he started the engine and released the hand brake.

'What's happened?'

She told him.

'Whatever you do just now,' he said, 'it is bound to be wrong in Barbara's eyes. It's wrong if you just live with me, it's wrong if you marry me, and I'll bet if you gave me the chuck tomorrow, she would tell you off for being fickle.'

It was slow and difficult driving until they got to Blackfriars, but after that his theory seemed sound in practice and the long way round, by the broad, winding

Embankment, despite the right turn in front of Big Ben, allowed them to move faster than any other road traffic at the rush hour. 'I've got something I want to talk to you about,' he told her, 'but it can wait.'

He suggested that he should drop her at her flat, and meet her again for dinner, or if she could not dine with him, immediately after.

'No, you come up.'

She gave him her reasons. She had already told her daughter that she was going to marry him, and the sooner Barbara pulled herself together and realised he was not a bogey the better. If Barbara should be out, which was always possible, then he could stay and talk about whatever he wanted to talk about.

'Is it important?' she asked.

'Everything about you and me is important. I've something to show you.'

This was while they were waiting at the traffic lights by the Albert Bridge. A few minutes later they were at Queen's Gate. How much better, she thought, this home-coming was than the last! Yet the situation had not changed. She had left it alone for the whole of a working day and the only difference between her midnight arrival and now was that this time James the Considerate came up in the lift with her.

It was as simple as that – she was no longer a woman alone. And felicitously the door opened without the slightest resistance and it did not occur to her, until the action was over, to call to mind that symbolism of the key in the lock which, because she thought it proceeded from a gross appetite, she would always keep to herself, secret

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even from the man who followed her into the flat, who had slept with her and would again and again.

Miss Henderson reported that Barbara had been out to lunch and tea, she did not know where, but had returned half an hour before.

'Is it better for me to go now? Or would that be postponing something she has got to face sooner or later?'

'I'm the one,' said Eleanor, 'who must tackle her first.'

Barbara, however, had shut her mother out again, not this time out of the flat, but out of her room. She refused to unlock the door.

'I'm all right. I'm not ill. I'm not worked up. But I don't want to see you while that man is in the place.'

When this was reported to 'that man' in the drawing-room, he began to prise himself out of his armchair – he had chosen the most comfortable. He was making himself as quickly at home as a dog, and she silently applauded him for it. She would not let him go either; she would not let him so much as quit the armchair, pushing him down by the shoulders while he was off-balance, and then, seating herself on the arm of the chair, giving him the kiss he might have had publicly in Cheapside.

'What was it you wanted to talk about?'

'This,' he said. From the inside pocket of his coat he pulled a wallet, and opening the wallet, produced a folded piece of paper. It looked like a cheque. At that moment the telephone rang.

She left the armchair to go and answer it. The caller was Willie Savoy and he was in one of his urgent, self-important moods.

She listened and then said: 'But Willie, I'm only just in and I'm tired. Can't it wait till tomorrow?'

Out of the side of her eye, she saw James Hogan rise from the armchair and walk to stand directly in front of the 'Venus with the Fan'. It was about the picture that Willie Savoy was talking, confidentially but in vague terms which irritated her.

'Can't you understand me,' Willie demanded from the other end of the line. 'Have you forgotten that the publicity release date is Tuesday?'

She had forgotten. She had forgotten everything except her lover and her daughter. Only four more days and then she could tell them both. Barbara would discover that she had not a potential but an actual small fortune to inherit: she would give all the credit to her father and none to her mother, but that was unimportant. Eleanor's intention had become more specific: she intended to use most of the money from the sale of the picture to set up a trust fund, with a life interest in most of it for herself, reverting to Barbara, and a life interest for Barbara in a smaller part. Because Willie had made her keep it secret, she had not been able to take advice on this, but that would follow soon enough when the picture was sold.

Willie, shrill and agitated at the other end of the line, seemed now to be implying that something had gone wrong with his plans.

'Are you trying to call it all off?' she asked.

Willie said no. 'But a postponement? Yes, it might be the best thing to leave it all over till next season, or better still, next year, or even the year after.'

She felt quite sick and frail, debilitated. She had grown

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used these last few days to a new conception of herself, as a woman economically secure, well-to-do if not actually wealthy. Only with difficulty did she manage to speak clearly into the telephone.

'Willie, you'd better come round here. And Willie, I have news for you too.' She put down the telephone and turned and said: 'Darling, I'm going to tell him. I hope you don't mind.'

Hogan did not turn away from the picture immediately and this irritated her.

'You know who I was talking to,' she exclaimed, 'so don't pretend.'

At that, he not only turned away from the picture, but walked away from it, towards her.

'I don't pretend anything,' he said, without a hint of humour or irony in his eyes or in his voice. 'I couldn't help hearing – but I'd much rather have been giving all my attention to the picture. It's lovely. I like it more and more, but it's not by Tintoretto. And your friend Savoy knows it's not.'

'Oh, really,' she protested, but mildly: 'is that still bothering you? I thought we had all agreed it's a matter of opinion?'

'Most attributions are. Some opinions have the weight of authority. Others carry their own conviction. My opinion seems to have convinced Mr Savoy by delayed action.'

He then showed her, unfolded, so that she could read the handwritten figures on it before she took it into her own hands, the cheque he had removed, a few minutes before, from his pocket book. It was for £2,000. It was

made out to James Hogan and the signature she recognised as that of Willie Savoy. It was not crossed.

Hogan explained.

'He came to see me this morning. He said nothing that so much as hinted at a conspiracy. He said he was very taken with a drawing I owned and would like to buy it from me. He said he put perhaps a higher valuation on it than I did and would I for once defer to his tastes because he was, after all, a good deal older. He then offered me that cheque.'

'And you took it?'

'I took it,' Hogan told her, 'to show to you. Now it can be burned or torn up.'

Eleanor looked down at the piece of overprinted pink paper in her hands.

'It's an open cheque,' she said.

Hogan at last smiled. 'That was part of the idea, I fancy,' he explained. 'I could cash it at his Bank, if I wished, and then the payment would not go through my own account and would be almost impossible to trace.'

'What do you call this sort of thing - blackmail?'

'I think the word is bribery?'

'James, did you give him the drawing?'

This time he was genuinely amused, as he shook his head and said: 'He would have destroyed it by now. I ran him out of my flat and all he had time to do was to inform me that I had no evidence against him. And, of course, he's right. The cheque might be payment for anything. I imagine he went straight to his bank to put a stop order on it.'

She needed a moment to perceive that there were

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further deductions to be drawn. First, she had to test Hogan, to make up her mind whether she would marry him after all.

She put it indirectly. 'I suppose,' she suggested, 'at first, anyhow, you thought I might have sent him?'

'I knew you hadn't.'

'What made you so sure? And if I didn't send him, I might have had a pretty shrewd idea what he was up to.'

'You might, but I knew, and I still know, that you didn't.'

He wasn't a whited sepulchre or a maggoty apple after all: what he seemed to be he was all the way through. The marriage could take place as previously announced, for she loved him, she positively adored him. Her difficulty was going to be to live up to him.

'You're too high-minded,' she grumbled. 'You can strike noble attitudes about money but it's not so easy for me. I've been poor. I've been alone in the world, but these last years I've had a Tintoretto. That one. A Tintoretto to sell. It's funny, I never could make up my mind to part with it and when I did, it was before you came along, before I knew of your existence. Mind you, it was only a day or two before. As though something was telling me that the time had come to part.'

He understood the hidden reference in her words. He brought it out and confronted it.

'But listen,' he said persuasively. 'Claude Kent never saw that picture as it is now. He bought something quite different. And that you got rid of when you had the picture cleaned.'

'That may be logical, but all the same – the trouble is that, now, I suppose, it's not worth selling?'

From behind them, a voice, an angry voice, Barbara's voice, interrupted, saying: 'It's not yours to sell.'

She must have opened the door very quietly, or perhaps neither of them had bothered to close it properly.

Eleanor felt suddenly violate and unclean. For the second time her daughter was making her wonder if she had been spied upon. How long had the girl been at the door, watching and listening? She returned her mother's scrutiny with an indignant glare.

'I was coming,' she said, 'to ask if you were going to be at home tonight or if I should go out. And when I opened the door I heard you say the picture wasn't worth selling. It's my picture. My father meant it to come to me.'

Eleanor felt James Hogan giving her a glance of enquiry.

'There's nothing in writing,' she said. 'There's no legal obligation on me. But it is true——' she turned to Barbara '—all the money was to go to you. Only now there isn't going to be any money. Or damned little.'

'Why not?'

Hogan would have undertaken the task of explaining but, with a gesture, she prevented him. In Barbara's eyes he was the man about to supplant her father and nothing he said at present would get a fair hearing. Eleanor gave a brief account of the state of affairs and Barbara, to do her justice, listened intently.

'It all seems crazy to me,' she concluded. 'There's the picture. If it's by Tintoretto, it's worth a hundred and fifty or two hundred thousand pounds or even a quarter of a million. If it's by Giuseppe Porta Salviati it's worth no more than — how much, James?'

'Three, four, five thousand.'

'So there you are,' Eleanor said hopelessly. 'Heads we're rich, tails – well, we might as well keep the picture if that's all it will fetch.'

She had said nothing in front of Barbara about Willie Savoy and the arrangements for selling the picture at auction which were to have been 'released' to the Press on the following Tuesday and would now have to be cancelled on the Monday. Obviously, also, it was wiser to tell the girl nothing about poor Willie's attempt at bribery.

'That's all I want,' Barbara said. 'You keep it and I'll inherit it when you die.'

Hogan, quite horrified, opened his mouth and no doubt would have reproved the girl for crudity of thought and crudity of phrase, but Eleanor frowned him to silence.

'It's all very well,' she told her daughter, 'for you to be snooty about money. But how would you feel if you were turning down not three thousand or four thousand but a quarter of a million?'

'It's the same thing in principle,' Barbara retorted.

Having twice heard from her own lips the magical, rounded term 'a quarter of a million', Eleanor felt a sudden return of optimism, which excited her, and excited her to talk. Presently what she was saying became, to her, entirely convincing.

'Willie Savoy is so temperamental. Almost a manic-depressive. He may take quite a different line tomorrow or the next day. After all, the whole argument depends on one drawing, and as you're going to marry the owner, James, you have acquired a vested interest. No, I'm prepared to go through with it. I really am.'

Barbara, awed, said: 'Is it really worth all that money?'

I mean, if it were put up at Sotheby's or Christie's——'

'Only the other week,' Eleanor assured her, 'a Gainsborough went for £130,000. This is a Tintoretto, remember'.

'But it's not,' said Hogan.

She restrained herself and merely said: 'Nobody thinks so except you and poor, silly Willie.'

'But we happen to be the only two people qualified to form an opinion who have seen the drawing.'

She became aware that Barbara had stopped looking at her and was, for the first time, looking direct at Hogan. She looked at him too, because she had to, because he was talking not loudly, not even forcefully, but with an authority which carried its own justification.

'You can't sell the picture without disclosing the fact that the drawing exists and that I think they are both by Porta. It may be a matter of opinion but you must let other people see the material on which to base their own opinion. That's fundamental. That's what all art historical research is about, behind the fuss and the vanities and the jealousies. If you put the picture up for sale I am bound to publish the drawing and start an argument.'

She had an idea, a simple, trouble-saving, timely idea.

'Suppose I were to sell it privately? Through a dealer. As a matter of fact, not so long ago, I was offered a hundred thousand pounds for it plus fifty per cent of the difference between that and whatever it was ultimately sold for.'

At this point, Barbara did, for a second, spare her a glance, so perhaps she had at last impressed her daughter. She had impressed her lover too.

'Ah,' he said, 'if only you had accepted! Or if you had

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sold it last year, when prices were almost as high as they are likely to be now. Then I would not have had the drawing or known about it, and you could have collected a lot of money with an easy conscience.'

Why hadn't she done so? Why had she kept the picture, with its heavy insurance premiums to find every year, year after year? She had kept it out of an exaggerated and guilt-ridden respect for her dead husband's dying wish. She was guilt-ridden because she did not in fact respect her husband, she was not sure she had ever loved him and the deep, implacable guilt extended to her daughter for having chosen such a man to beget her child. Hogan should never have spoken words which touched, however obliquely, on that subject.

'Now it's too late,' he said. 'Now you know the truth. And the truth is sacred. If you must sell the picture, sell it as a Giuseppe Porta, not a Tintoretto.'

'You're talking morality aren't you?'

He could not deny it.

'It makes you sound a bit of a prig, darling.'

That hurt him and she saw that it hurt and she was glad at the same moment that she was sorry. She had no opportunity, however, to apologise, for Barbara, who was looking suddenly more alert and vital than she had done for weeks, cried: 'He's not a prig. Don't you dare to say so. He's right. He's absolutely right and you ought to be thankful that he's here to tell you what to do.'

The strangest thing about this outburst was that James Hogan seemed neither surprised nor embarrassed by it. He said, so stiffly that she knew the wound was still smarting: 'I'm glad to have some support.'

Eleanor acknowledged to herself that she had been defeated. She did not resent defeat so much as that a decision had been forced on her. She wanted to be ungracious about it and she was.

'As far as I can see, she grumbled, 'it's costing me a fortune to marry you.'

Barbara spoiled the effect by exclaiming, almost as though she were demanding a share: 'Don't forget the money would have come to me. So I'm losing a lot too.'

The bell from the front door sounded in the kitchen.

'That'll be Willie.'

'I'll go,' said Hogan.

'I'll come with you,' said Barbara.

Eleanor caught from her lover a secret, frantic glance of appeal. He could no longer afford to stand on the dignity of his wounded feelings. She wondered if Barbara had begun to transfer to Hogan the hero-worshipping reverence she had kept for Claude Kent? If so, she was making him not only a step-father but a father figure, which meant there was an element of sexual provocation in her attitude. Hogan had realised it already. He was alarmed. 'Don't worry, my pet,' she thought, fondly, 'I'll protect you. Neither Barbara nor any other female is going to get a grip on you while I'm about.'

Aloud, she said: 'James, please stay a bit and help me with Willie. He confuses me with art jargon. I can't stand up to him.'

Miss Henderson announced 'Mr Savoy' and held the door open for him. Barbara side-stepped behind him, to avoid the obligation of the simultaneous hail and farewell, and was gone.

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As soon as the door closed, the first thing was to let Willie know that she was going to marry James Hogan. He surprised her, and Hogan, too, by not being surprised. He was hardly interested. Taut with self-importance and bursting with news, he took the cheque when Hogan produced it, folded it and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket. 'Not that any of that matters now,' he said.

Eleanor tackled him.

'Willie, I want you to know right away that I understand the situation and I'm quite happy to have the sale called off.'

He did not seem to be interested in the sale either.

To Hogan, ignoring her, he said momentarily: 'Let's be quite clear about this. What I'm going to tell you is my discovery. I am going to publish it. Nobody else.'

He turned back to Eleanor. 'My dear, after I had telephoned you, I just happened to pick up a photograph of the "Venus" from my desk. I looked at it and something struck me like a flash. An inspiration. Mind you, I ought to have thought of it before. I admit that. So ought we all. It's in this month's *Burlington*. The same sort of thing. About that Veronese in Madrid.'

Eleanor saw Hogan become suddenly excited.

'Not the book?' he cried. 'It can't be the book?'

'It is!'

They were both in front of the picture now, side by side, peering at the part where the little boy was squatting with the book propped open in front of him.

'I've brought some tracing paper,' Willie announced. 'But I'm sure it's all right. I looked at the photograph with a magnifying glass. It's a signature beyond a doubt.'

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'Whose signature?' she asked.

Neither of them bothered to answer.

Willie allowed Hogan to place the semi-transparent paper over the book in the painting. The paper was put on the left side of the open book first, and, while Hogan held it in place, Willie began to trace, not the outline of the book, but the brush marks, in blackish paint, along the top edges of the pages, where sometimes, on a real book, gold leaf is used. The blackish pattern, which Eleanor had taken no special note of before, appeared to be haphazard and without significance. Next the paper was moved to the right hand side of the book and the pattern there similarly traced on a different part of the paper.

'What is it all about?' she demanded.

Willie, the urbane Willie, did not bother to answer, and her own considerate James said no more than: 'Show you in a minute, I hope. Got any scissors?'

She had to go away and find scissors, and when she brought them she received no thanks for it.

The scissors were needed to cut the paper away from the edges of the two tracings, which were then placed together and laid flat on a table.

'I told you!' Willie boasted.

'You were right!' James Hogan admitted.

She was compelled to ask twice before she was allowed to peer down at the two pieces of paper, now juxtaposed so that what had been two tracings in soft black pencil had become one. She could see that the traced pattern was a number of letters, capital letters, and slowly she spelled them out. They read: 'IOSGARFAGNINUS'.

She demanded an explanation and was given one of

sorts, fragmentary and inconsequent. It came to her as overheard snatches of dialogue between two art historians on what they evidently considered to be an art historical occasion.

It seemed that there was, in the Prado Museum, at Madrid, a well known painting by Veronese, 'Christ Preaching in the Temple', which must have been seen by millions of people, in the original and in reproduction, but only one person had paid attention to the markings at the ends of the pages of a book held open by a figure in the foreground. He had realised, by a stroke of intuitive imagination, that, if the book had been closed, the markings, put together, would have made, in Roman numbers, the date when the picture was painted, 1548. Veronese lived in Venice, so did Giuseppe Porta, and at much the same time. One had learned from the other this ingenious device by which information could be recorded, but only for those with instructed eyes.

'But what does it mean?' she interrupted, and tried to pronounce the jumble of letters in the tracing.

It turned out that the IOS was short for Joseph which was short for the Latin 'Iosephus' and in this, as in his only other known signature, Giuseppe Porta had omitted not only the 'Porta' but the 'Salviati', a name he had adopted from the master in whose studio he had learned his craft, just as that master before him had adopted the same name from a cardinal patron. Giuseppe Porta Salviati chose, however, to claim this picture as his own work by describing himself on it in Latin as 'Garfagninus', meaning that he had been born in the small town of Castelnovo della Garfagnana.

'They don't make it easy for you, do they, these painters?'

James Hogan, the man who was soon to be her husband, did her the courtesy of looking as though he might be considering how to answer, but he seemed to find no suitable words.

She tried again. 'Isn't it a bit like one of those terribly highbrow crossword puzzles?'

Each man in turn gave her an offended stare, and she longed to shout, stamp her feet and remind them that only that morning one had attempted to bribe the other in order that this same painting might be sold for nearly a hundred times as much as it would bring her now they had worked out the fanciful signature.

'Where will you publish it?' Hogan asked.

'The *Burlington* I expect. It will cause a sensation but, as dear old B.B. taught us, we must all be prepared to change our minds now and then.'

Not even the citation of Berenson by the magic initials provoked Hogan to a satiric comment. The whole incident was being carried off with art historical high seriousness.

Willie prepared to depart.

'My dear Eleanor, this is a triumph for me but, I fear, a great disappointment for you. A pity, a pity!'

'I congratulate you,' Hogan said and insisted on shaking hands. Willie was moved. One more handshake, she thought, and he would have begun to spatter tears all over the carpet.

When she came back to the drawing room, after seeing Willie out, she said: 'Isn't he going to mention your drawing? After all, you were the one who all along insisted

the picture wasn't by Tintoretto. That's why he tried to bribe you – because you have the drawing.'

'The drawing no longer matters,' Hogan said. 'Not for the *Burlington*. Isn't it amazing? There's a man who is going to create a stir, in his old age, among art historians – yet he has no principles, he's lazy, superficial, conventional in all his ideas and he has no taste and no real eye for a picture, still less a drawing.'

'But you envy him?'

Hogan admitted it.

'It's my own fault. I had just as good a chance as he had. Better. I'd been studying the picture. Why, I'd just finished reading that *Burlington* article when I came to see you for the first time.'

'You must have been thinking of something else,' she said, teasing him. 'But it wasn't me. You didn't fall in love with me at first sight. I remember perfectly well. All you were interested in was that picture.'

'If that were true I would have spotted the signature right away. After all,' he added, 'I'm not normally stupid.'

'But you're conceited,' she said. 'And it's partly my fault for letting you get me so easily. If I had been wise I would never—'

He interrupted and he interrupted slyly: 'You would never have left that key in the lock, would you?'

It was disturbing to learn that he had penetrated her most secret mind, that all along he had understood the symbolism of the bunch of keys, yet she felt more gratified than disturbed. This was because, unknown to her, her mind had obliterated all traces of her first lapse of memory, on the evening of the burglary, when she had left the

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key stuck in the door to advertise her unconscious need. That was before she knew that such a person as James Hogan existed. She had not mentioned it to him. She had not mentioned it to the police. She would conceal it from everyone for ever and ever because it shocked and scandalised her, and the concealment would be easy because her mind had already buried the memory.

She now firmly believed that only once had she left the key forgetfully in the lock, and that was on the previous evening, when the lapse was not disgraceful because she knew who would be coming to the front door of the flat. If James Hogan had interpreted that as a come on signal from her unconscious she would not repudiate it. It had been a signal to him and to no one else, a person to person call. And she foresaw that it would soon become a private reference, part of a secret language between her lover and herself, the language spoken in a land inhabited by only two people but a land without loneliness.

THE END

